A Home for African Humanities
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"Enchanting" is the most appropriate word to describe the African Humanities Project Workshop held December 16 – 17, 2024 at the Center of African Studies of Mohammed VI Polytechnic University – Ben Guerir. Held in collaboration with the [Institute of African Studies at Columbia University](#) and [Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne](#), a multi-generational and multinational group of scholars converged to interrogate the meaning of the humanities for Africa's future as the first of three planned meetings. As [a professor of Africana studies](#) at Rutgers University that has worked extensively on the literary and intellectual cultures of Sahelian Africa, I was pleased to be hosted by a dynamic team in the process of institution building. Something significant is happening at the Center for African Studies at UM6P that I for one intend to watch closely.

Having participated in the workshop and engaged in lively discussion over the course of those all too brief two days and in the time since, I truly believe that the assembled team has the makings of something that will have great impact. To be honest, I find the task of writing this note daunting, given my overwhelming enthusiasm for the African Humanities Project (hereafter the Project), which, to take up one of the first workshop's key themes, felt like home.

My primary recommendation is to consolidate the momentum and energies unleashed by the first workshop by first and foremost refining and revising the Project's objectives. Doing so will clarify the form and content of subsequent meetings, suggest what processes and principles we should adopt for our collaboration, and generally build on the coherence that is already taking shape. What follows is my understanding to the original intention of the workshop, a summary of what happened, key questions that were raised, and the rationale of my primary recommendation followed by secondary recommendations.

The Original Intention

I understand from the initial proposal and my communication with the organizers that the Project is a collaboration of scholars and institutions to "reinterpret the humanities from an African perspective." It does so because the shared intention is to move "the humanities" from the "narrow" humanism of Eurocentric thought, which relies on faulty colonial and racist historical narratives, towards a "humanism that measures up to the world." The Project proposes to achieve this reinterpretation through a "research program," "methodological interventions" and "educational initiatives" including curriculum development for universities and high schools. I want to think of this as "the what," "the why," and "the how" of the project overall.

For the first workshop, the proposal emphasized thinking through the relationship between history, geography, and knowledge. Specifically, it reasonably proposed that we begin by challenging well established meta-narratives about world-history that simultaneously

undermined the integrity, continuity, and unity of the African continent while underwriting European exceptionalism by linking European modernity with the inheritance of the classical tradition of Mediterranean antiquity. The premise was that a more rigorous accounting of deep African histories, its connections and circulations at the continental scale, by thinkers from the continent, would simultaneously reveal the dominant narrative that informs conventional humanities discussions to be false, while at the same time justifying the category of African humanities and its development across Atlantic institutional settings. There is much to be said about this framing, to which I will return in an incomplete fashion below.

The Interventions

In many ways, we followed through with this intention. In other ways, we both exceeded and fell short of it. Zakia Salime's paper set the Workshop's tone by insisting on the value of testimony in thinking the human. She also showed how the granularity of a rich, even if fragmented, comparative life history of "ordinary women with exceptional lives" can invalidate dominant social-scientific and pseudo-scientific concepts of "race" as being universally meaningful. In showing that blackness can signify geographic belonging and not "race" as a discriminatory regime, she carried out precisely what Toni Morrison in her 1975 lecture "A Humanist view" describes as humanistic work: "The second responsibility of artists and scholars is to bear down hard on those generalities: the statistics and the charts, and make them give up the life they're hiding." (There is much more to be said about how this lecture is real light for understanding the whats, whys, and risks of humanistic work, including the famous debate about the nomothetic versus the idiographic, but I will leave this aside for now.) In other words, the defining feature of humanistic work is its approach and orientation, not simply its "subject." It achieves a critical perspective not through pattern-seeking but through embracing singularity. The implications of the paper are stunning if you carry out its argument all the way through. In another historical period, the southern city of Tafilelt was seen as the heart of Alawi sovereignty, and yet modern assumptions about "cultural diffusionism", about geography, power, and development cannot imagine anything good emanating from South to North.

Aomar Boum's remarkable and careful methodological intervention attunes us to historical trauma, such as those relating to slavery, through attention to objects. Also, through his own creative practice of crafting a graphic novel to narrate the past pushes us to take the "form" of our scholarship as seriously as its content. This dimension of the sensorial in thinking history, of feeling history if you will, and of aesthetics, is an important axis of taking up history, geography, and knowledge at the levels of method, research, and teaching.

Ousmane Traore's intervention also brought into our awareness durable social structures and practices of movement and circulation that must be accounted for in thinking histories of the longue durée that have and continue to make much of the continent coherent. In particular, the vernacular Wolof concept of *laxas* and the Arabic idea *talab al-ʿilm* conveys the importance of mobility in understanding African history.

Madina Thiam invited us to "work from home" which for her, partly consists of thinking of the Niger delta as a center unto itself with its own processes of racialization. She traced how the violent displacements from and attempts to return to the region by the once enslaved Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, who put his Arabic literacy skills to work while captive in Jamaica, takes on new meaning when we ground ourselves in a particular geography.

Similarly, Rahal Boubrik's life-history of the Trans-Saharan merchant Hamed Bu l-'Araf completely shatters the brittle notion of the Sahara desert being a barrier to historical flows. Other contributions also highlighted macro-level, diplomatic, and institutional histories of Pan-Africanism that has worked upon, or within, the continental scale. Hisham Aidi carefully outlined the politics of Afro-Arab cooperation and its animating philosophies by the likes of Senegal's first President Léopold Senghor.

Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Mamadou Diouf both, from different angles explored the Diasporic development of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o "The African Idea" (*Something Torn, Something New*). These interventions challenged us not to limit the scope of African Humanities to a geography of the African continent. Diouf also suggested that we think about the "libraries" in which humanistic work resides or uses as a reference: Colonial, Islamic, Ancestral.

My own paper focused on understanding the current dilemma faced by African university that poses the possibility of disruption or decolonization, asking how might the humanities in Africa be thought at such a juncture? Reflecting on a lecture I gave on Shaykh Musa Kamara (1864-1945) at the Université Gaston Berger in Saint-Louis, Senegal in the summer following the most recent presidential elections, I described the present terrain and insights that the life and works of the colonial-era Muslim scholar offer for our times.

Finally, Jinny Prais and Sabrine Hakam elaborated on the politics of knowledge by showing in the first case the historicity of African humanistic interventions in the colonial period of the late 19th century and in the second the ongoing impact of colonial knowledge in conceiving historical development in the first place.

Taken together, "history, geography and knowledge" indeed allowed us to triangulate a space of interrogation in which an African humanities might flourish independently as well as invite a reinterpretation of dominant humanities scholarship.

Open Questions

However, I have an impression that some attendees wanted a more rigorous interrogation of "history, geography and knowledge" on African terms. The interest in including in our group more scholars, especially those working on African antiquity, from archeological and linguistic perspectives expressed this desire. There is indeed more one *could* do in this direction if we decided that this was a priority area. If we decided, as was indicated in the

workshop that African Antiquity, is a neglected area that represents an area of opportunity, we would certainly want to attend to this area much more. For example, we did not explicitly take up the question of which philosophy of history might best characterize reckonings with the past in Africa. One might say that implicitly, that across several papers genealogy and life-history were important frameworks for a number of presenters, but it would be worth stating that in a more definite way. Conceptually, how should history be thought? To what extent, are we reproducing the very old inversion fallacy (You say you were first and we were last. We say we are first and you are last)? How might history be thought in a way that is not simply a reaction to older narratives (see again the Toni Morrison lecture) but the creation of something new? Or is the point not to produce the new, and rather to transmit the old? Is history even the most important pillar of an African humanities? Also, Ibn Khaldun was invoked, but what work would we want that reference to do for us in our collective thinking. I have some thoughts on this, on how one might do this, but the point I am making here is there was much ground that we proposed for the first workshop that was not explored as it relates to the triumvirate of "history, geography, and knowledge."

And yet, we did much more! We asked deeper, and I think more fundamental questions about what the African Humanities might be without taking any given discipline, as such, for granted as essential to the Project. I include here some of the ones I see in my notes:

1. [Emmanuel Kattan](#) :
   a. What are the real needs that exist for African humanities?
   b. How would you fill those gaps?
2. [Laurent Jaffro](#) offered an objective/object-centered way of defining the humanities not as a set of disciplines that need to be represented, but as developing the "sensitivity towards the qualities of objects." Here, he avoids the logocentrism that is often implied or invoked with the use of the language of "texts" and "reading." With this definition in mind, he posed the questions:
   a. What objects chosen for their exemplary nature or their formative power are worth discovering and frequenting?
   b. What skills are required of an African Humanities?
   c. Who are the expert judges of these matters and in which fields?
3. [Thomas Asher](#) made remarks about the famous Dar Debates, his experience with working on developing the Humanities and the Humanistic social sciences in Africa through large-scale funding schemes to invest in individual scholars, and the emergence of "engaged humanities" in South Africa. Facing the emergence of a "polycrisis" that consists of demographic shifts in Africa, the rise of China, technological change, climate change, and the failure of institutions around the world to respond amidst growing austerity, he asked:
   a. What are the needs?
   b. What are the core questions?
   c. He also mentioned the development of the African Humanities Association based at the University of Ghana at Legon, and a number of other entities

that we would do well to be in communication with, if we are thinking about operating at a greater scale.

4. Diagne, Diouf, Prais and Aidi all brought up the "language question" in their presentations. Notably, Bachir framed this in his talk in reference to Ngũgĩ's reading of Walter Benjamin's idea of translation being the language of languages.

5. Interestingly, the senior historian among us, Diouf ended his discussion not with history but with literature by arguing that in African novels, history is the history to come, and not a history to be reconstituted. In other words, he anticipated Houssine Dehbi's call to make the Project reflect "a hypertrophy of the imagination."

6. One resonating point of Hakam's intervention for me was that decolonization of the curriculum is not only an issue of *what* we learn, but *how* we learn.

7. Aidi made a compelling point about the fundamental importance of using the Project as a training ground for African doctoral students. The papers by Houssine Dehbi and Oyeyemi Modupeola were sterling examples of new readings of classic and emerging African literature that take on themes of gender, migration, and injustice.

I take all of these points to be excessive, in a good way, of the original intention set for the first workshop. We should not lose the opportunity that the unanticipated offers us in re-establishing our collective intention. For that reason, we should not rush to add more elements or personnel, but to think deeply and collaboratively about what is already on the table in front of us. To use the language of emergent strategy theorist adrienne maree brown, what is the next most elegant step? "More" is probably not the best answer. Rather, let us go deeper.

Recommendations

In that vein, I want to make the following suggestions:

1) We should decide if we see the Project as being primarily a shared research agenda, an experiment in innovating either a research or teaching method, or an initiative to develop curricula. Each one of these paths would have their own objectives that would compete for time and resources. While any of these would be a worthwhile goal, trying to do all at once might be a sure way of doing none of them as well as might otherwise be done.

2) We should undertake a state of the field of "the humanities" in general and of African Humanities in particular to collectively benefit from work that has already been done. In the last ten years or so, there have been some very interesting work done on the humanities as a domain of knowledge. As fate would have it, my forthcoming book *Textual Life: Islam, Africa, and the Fate of the Humanities* (September 2025, Columbia University Press) seeks to make an intervention in this space. Such a state of the field might be a great exercise for grad students. I am happy to work with others on this.

3) Third, we should keep a global scope while centering continental Africa. This allows us to hold in tension the two meanings of "Africa for the Africans" that Bachir mentioned while also creating new space for meanings of statements such as that made by al-Hajj Ibrahim Niasse "*Ifriqiyya ila al-ifriqiyyin*." In other words, the making of many African diasporas throughout the world has been constitutive to the making and remaking of Africa. Limiting the scope to the physical geography of the continental land-mass can only be justified in reference to "area studies" which is an area of control and not a region of understanding, one that may soon may be disappearing in preference for global studies.

4) We should distinguish what we would love to do with more funding from what we can reasonably achieve with the limited resources already obtained for the two workshops to come. Of course, I would like to revolutionize higher education and put the African Humanities at the center of a new global university. But this is a larger political project that needs to find its material basis and supporting social forces. In the meantime, we have an opportunity to *model* what's possible under the rubric of the African Humanities. With the people already involved, we have a glut of talent, expertise, and experience with which we can do something significant right now. "The text" does not need to be found. What is needed is to figure out how we direct our regard. Let us, for example, focus on one "African" object for the next workshop and work collaboratively to imagine what a classroom session would look like. What would that object need to be cared for? It could be a Chi-wara, a passage from the "Book of the Dead," a recording of "Water Get No Enemy." I'm less invested in the object than I am in what we do with it. And we don't need expertise to do it, even as expertise will be a resource. What histories, led by curiosity and sensitivity, can we unravel with it? What botanical knowledge and materials science would it invite? What craft skills does it require to make and what ideologies give it meaning? What economies of circulation does it move in at present? Etc. I imagine that doing this work together would be substantial but achievable and advance the Project by giving us a prototype of what we are calling the African humanities. Along the way, we could document the process in either an open or more curated way. We could draft learning objectives tied to it, etc. Standing alone, this would be meaningful in its own right and could be used in a proposal for more funding, and further elaborated in an iterative process.

5) We should frame the African Humanities as a pursuit of Justice. I think that often when we are speaking of decolonization, we are seeking justice in and for a world that has been made by injustice. Explicitly claiming that is powerful, and immediately describes *the value* of the humanities for the present and future beyond market-logic or the prerogatives of purely political power.

Let us continue to make this house of the African Humanities a home.