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Strengthening Understanding Between Africanists in the West (North America) and in Africa

Manelisi Genge

*Welcome Address for the Fourth Annual Midwest
Graduate Student Conference in African Studies
held at Michigan State University*

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished faculty and guests, I am pleased to welcome you all on behalf of the organizers of the Fourth Annual Midwest Graduate Student Conference in African Studies at Michigan State University. Those of you who are here at our university for the first time will see tomorrow the beauty of our campus. We, the conference organizers, hope that you will enjoy your brief visit to this famous university which is also the home of the H-Net Humanities & Social Sciences On-Line and that after the conference you will return with fond memories to your respective institutions. We also hope that all of us here will be able to forge durable professional contacts which could lead to collaborative research projects in the future.

Like the annual meetings of its mother body, the African Studies Association, this conference brings together participants from various disciplines. By so doing, this conference encourages scholarly conversation across disciplines. This is indeed a noble academic exercise. However, I think there are still some missing angles in our study of Africa.

It is the study of the point of convergence between Africa and the West in the contemporary period. We all know that a post-colonial Africa did not retreat to a splendid isolation after the end of the European colonial rule. It remained an important part in international affairs during the Cold War era. And it is still a significant geographical region in the post-Cold War era. We have a considerable knowledge of the convergence point between Africa and the West during the colonial period. However, I am hesitant to say the same about the contemporary period. Here then it seems to me we have a knowledge gap. And it becomes conspicuous when one takes into account the fact that as we gathered here tonight we are all concerned with having a better understanding of Africa and how best to improve social, economic, political and health conditions of the people in the continent. Most of us have conducted fieldwork in Africa while some are still working on their research proposals. We have met Africa (Africans) in the field and diagnosed her problems and sometimes have recommended prescriptions. But I doubt that Africa knows us as much as we know her. We seem to have not explained ourselves well to her.

There is a critical need to redefine the researcher-subject relationship. There are instances in the past and the present which indicate the interests of the researcher and the researcher's home country as being at the center defining this relationship. Ideally the situation should be a balancing act between the interests of the researcher and the subject. As we move to the twenty-first century, these ethical issues should be brought into the core of the research agenda. We have had a situation where researchers and policy consultants have not been held accountable for the consequences of their suggestions.

Earlier I mentioned that some researchers from the West seem not to have introduced themselves and their research agenda well to Africa and consequently Africa knows very little if she knows anything about the researcher. If I were to use a metaphor, it is like a patient who gets a prescription from his/her doctor, but does not know the doctor. Imagine a situation where patients regularly visit a doctor's consulting room and the doctor gets to know them well, and yet the patients know nothing about the doctor. Such a situation unduly privileges a doctor over his/her patients in any encounter they may have. Sometimes it could produce an unnecessary tension and misunderstanding between the doctor and the patients. At worse, it could lead to a situation where a doctor's camp could produce many doctors and the patients' camp more patients. Doctors sometimes forget to ask the patients about how they feel or what they think. Instead, they diagnose the patients and give them prescriptions. Surely, this is an unhealthy situation for obvious reasons that I do not intend to discuss here. And the doctor's metaphor could be developed further, but let me stop it here.

We, young scholars from both Africa and the West, are the future intermediaries between the two regions. I think it is extremely important for us to know each other well in order to develop a sound relation, which is not characterized by a doctor-patient analogy. We ought to meet as equals. And once we do that, then we could develop a conducive environment for other activities such as collaborative research and business ventures between us. Africans' and women's faces are now increasingly becoming a familiar presence at the annual African Studies Association meetings. This will invariably lead to a call for the restructuring of the African Studies and its research agenda.

It seems to me that the themes like the recolonization of Africa and imperialism which are currently being suggested by other scholars are overused concepts to be of any help to the study of the meeting space between Africa and the West. At best, if emphasized too much they might drive Africa to adopt a laager mentality, or alternatively may lead to fatalism. Both possible reactions may not be the best for Africa because globalization is making the world smaller and interdependent. Instead of fostering scare feelings between Africa and the West, I think, we ought to cultivate better understanding and communication between the two peoples. We could do this by studying topics like Africa in the global economy, communication (internet) system, the roles of World Bank and IMF in Africa, US-Africa relations (with emphasis

particular country/countries), among others. One of the most important links between Africa and the west is the economic one, and yet one gets an impression that in our study of Africa we neglect to examine this link and what is means for both sides. Consequently, one often gets an impression that the Africa we are talking about in our scholarly works enjoys a splendid isolation from the rest of the world. She is neither affected by nor she impacts the world outside her borders.

Graduate student conferences in African Studies like this one must strive to forge an exchange of scholarly views between Africanists in the west and those based in Africa. I know that we, the organizers of the present conference, have tried our best to bring graduate students from Africa to this conference, but without much success due to problems beyond our control. However there is another way that we could explore in order to encourage the exchange of scholarly ideas between Africanists in the west and those in the continent. We could do this by seeking out published and unpublished papers written by our colleagues in Africa. There is a lot that is out there which does not easily reach us here. If we ignore such a literature, we might end up talking among ourselves with a pretense that we are talking with those on the African continent as well.

There is a need for studies that adopt a comparative approach in the study of Africa. The comparative approach could be broader in scope, i.e., comparing events in Africa and elsewhere in the world. But the comparative view I have in mind is the narrower one that compares events in, say for example, Nigeria and South Africa, or events in Senegal with those in Kenya. By so doing, we might bring about a better appreciation of developments in Africa.

What I have suggested in this address is that we, Africanists based in the west, ought to engage in soul searching about our responsibilities to Africa itself as we conduct our research and make our careers from the data we get from the continent. I think we must always be concerned about the ethical implications of conducting research in Africa. Some people might counter my suggestions by stating that Africanists have always done some of the things I have drawn attention to above. I would respond by stating that probably not this generation of graduate students, a generation I am concerned with here. I am also calling for a dialogue in African Studies between scholars in the West and those in Africa. I think there is much to be gained from such a conversation.

Ladies and gentlemen, I hope you will enjoy this conference and will also benefit from the various presentations in the next two days. With these words, I wish you all the best during your brief stay with us here at MSU.