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Abandoning Africa

The fate of African Studies

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BY JANE DARBY MENTON
Monday, January 28, 2013

When the Yale Divinity School introduced African language courses into Yale's curriculum in the late 18th century, becoming one of the first American universities to cast its eye towards the continent, scholars could not have anticipated how two centuries of globalization would knit the globe more closely together. Technology transformed trans-oceanic travel from a lengthy, grueling, and dangerous process

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into a brief plane ride. Social media opened lines of communication that 18th-century academics could never have imagined possible. The rapidly globalizing world has generated a new emphasis on a global education. Yet last November, Africanists assembled in Luce Hall with questions about Yale's commitment to the study of Africa throughout the University. Standing before faculty and students, Kamari Clarke, the chair of Yale's Council of African Studies, demanded, "What would it take to put African Studies back on the map?"

As one of the first American universities to include Africa in its mainstream curriculum, Yale has a rich legacy in the field. Since 1985, the Council of African Studies, a subsidiary body of the MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies, has coordinated the study of Africa at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The Council has traditionally been a small but robust part of Yale, but budget cuts and faculty attrition have recently thrown the department into a state of uncertainty. Despite growing student demand, those who came to Yale with the intention of studying Africa have been left echoing Clarke's question and wondering when and if the University will listen.

For over 25 years, the Council of African Studies netted significant external funding, particularly from the federal Title VI program, which was originally authorized in the National Defense of Education Act of 1958. But in May 2011, the federal government slashed funding for the Title VI and Fulbright Hays programs — which offer students and universities financial support for foreign language education — by nearly \$50 million. The loss in federal funding came on the heels of an internal announcement by University President Richard Levin and Provost Peter Salovey, requesting that academic and nonacademic units in the University trim spending to reduce the \$68 million budget gap remaining from Yale's financial struggles in the 2008 recession, further limiting African Studies' budget.

In the 2012-13 school year, new problems emerged with the unanticipated departure of three prominent faculty members and Africanists: Ato Onoma, Christopher Blattman, and Mike McGovern — the Council's former director of Graduate Studies — all of whom took positions at other universities. Though Council members say these departures reflect the natural ebb and flow of academic opportunities, the simultaneous departure of three prominent Africanists struck a blow to Yale's African Studies program and sharply reduced the number of Africa-based courses.

Faculty members in the Council of African Studies characterized the University's interest in the African Studies program as tepid; prior to 2011's federal budget cuts, the Council struggled with administrators and faculty to accrue additional University funding and encourage the hiring of Africanists across departments. Since it is a council, rather than a department, African Studies lacks its own faculty positions and, in turn, a formal appointment process, making faculty replacement more complex. To compensate for the departure of three Africanists, the council must lobby search and recruiting committees across departments to recruit Africanists to fill positions. In 2011's town hall meeting, Council member and history professor Bob Harms said, "Our cooperation with the University always came from us raking in money with Title VI."

Frustrated by the intransigence, longtime Council chair Kamari Clarke decided to step down at the end of 2012. Though she will continue to be involved with the Council, as she has been for the past 14 years, Clarke said she felt the program had been "neglected" by the University. "There are very few places on campus that have Africa as its focus," Clarke said. "I have done an incredible amount of work and I didn't think that the administration was really playing their role in living out promises to help to rebuild and it's a lot of work."

The task of leading the Council and minimizing the gap made by his colleague's departure now lies with newly minted chair Christopher Udry, an Economics professor who has studied African microeconomic development. His office reflects the focus of his research — colorful posters and cloths decorate his walls, including a vibrant scene from Burkina Faso that Udry purchased when a coup stranded him in Ouagadougou and a large kente cloth from Ghana, where Udry conducts much of his research. In a frame behind his desk is a small collection of bulky iron rings, an old form of currency in Benin and a gift from a former graduate student who studied West Africa's economic history.

Udry, who was soccer teammates with one of the professors who left, lamented the "idiosyncratic" departure of his three colleagues, though he said that turnover and movement of prominent academics from one university to another is natural and even healthy for a major research institution. Udry acknowledged that the replacement process has proven difficult, but he cited rapidly expanding fields such as global health, human rights law and philosophy, and his own field, economics, as areas of the University that are placing a renewed emphasis on Africa.

His predecessor faced similar difficulties. Prior to the economic downturn, Clarke said she sought donors to endow faculty positions in African Studies, but the economic state of the University complicated the process. In light of larger budgetary issues, she said, "African Studies just fell to the wayside."

When students affiliated with the Council blue-booked this year, they found their course options limited,

compelling them to seek more innovative approaches to African Studies. Clarke said that many students have designed independent projects to enhance their study where the University does not have a designated class. Still, Clarke expressed frustration that the University has placed the onus of its internationalizing efforts on countries such as India, Singapore, and China, while only passively emphasizing African studies. “The larger problem was a political one ... political will and priority,” she said. “If we are going to say we are truly an international university, our curriculum needs to reflect that.”

There are currently three students in their second year of the two-year graduate program and eight in their first year. Though all are Africanists, students’ interests vary in subject and region — from dance to human rights, South Africa to Egypt, and everything in between.

For first-year students like Helinna Ayalew GRD ’14, Yale’s appeal has not been tarnished by recent changes. Ayalew, who is studying violent conflict in the horn of Africa, expressed mostly positive sentiments about the program’s small size, open curriculum, and University resources. But she said the struggles facing the program have been unnerving. The loss of faculty affected the courses that first-years could take, as many core African Studies courses, including Ato Onoma’s “Identities,” were no longer available. “It was kind of an unpleasant surprise; we all got accepted, then a bunch of people for various reasons decided to leave,” Ayalew said.

Still, Ayalew sees a positive side to the challenges. These limitations have also compelled her to take advantage of other parts of the University such as the Political Science department and law school. “We can really learn from each other, bounce ideas off each other,” she said. “I engage with perspectives I wouldn’t think of at all.”

Yet while first-year students came into an already altered program, the changes had a different effect on the smaller class of second-year students, many of whom took classes from the departed faculty members. Klara Wojtkowska GRD ’13 is a violinist by training who grew up in both the United States and Poland. Wojtkowska spent a year traveling the world on a Watson Fellowship after graduation from music school, and her travels brought her to South Africa, where she found a large population of Polish people. Though she began researching the Polish diaspora, she soon found herself drawn to South African theater performances and ultimately chose to pursue a graduate degree in African Theater. Similar to Ayalew, Wojtkowska was drawn to the interdisciplinary nature of Yale’s program, particularly the opportunity to take theater classes. All of the second-year students, including Wojtkowska, received full funding for their studies at Yale, which Wojtkowska cited as a factor that helped her overcome doubts about attending graduate school in a field so different from her prior education.

Like many of her peers who lack a clear-cut path of study within the existing African Studies courses, Wojtkowska has pieced together her concentration on Zimbabwean theater from across the University, drawing on Yale’s Theater Studies department and courses taught by council members, such as those on African language. One of Wojtkowska’s favorite courses at Yale was Ato Onoma’s “Identities.” As someone raised in different countries, the course, which examined the way that people self-organize, helped her grapple with difficult parts of her own identity. Onoma helped guide her thesis research, putting her into contact with other people in the field. Of the recent changes to the Council, Onoma’s departure was the biggest blow to Wojtkowska’s education.

Though Wojtkowska has had a largely positive experience in the Council, she noted that it has become more difficult for students in the program to find people whose interests align with their own, and financial constraints might hamper students’ ability for hands-on research abroad. The class below her, though significantly larger, had fewer resources, both financial and personal, to help them in their own academic path.

Justin Scott GRD ’13, another second-year student who took Onoma’s course, expressed concern about the direction of the program. Scott, who, like Wojtkowska, received full funding for his years at Yale, is conducting research on how social media networking tools are used in Africa. Some of his work examines the phenomenon of “couch surfing,” a topic he chose after a summer doing research in Nigeria.

Scott, who came to the Council intending to focus on development economics, described his time in Nigeria as transformative. Through Yale’s program, he studied two African languages, including Yoruba, which allowed him to connect with the people and culture on a deeper level. Of course, it was not always smooth. “One time I was accidentally referring to my penis when I was trying to refer to a car,” he laughingly confessed. “But the Yoruba I did know broke down barriers right away ... I think people respected the fact that I took the time to learn their language, that I wasn’t asking them questions without taking the time to learn about their culture and who they were.”

Earlier this semester budgetary constraints forced the Council to eliminate Igbo, one of the languages spoken in Nigeria. Though the Council has strategized alternative ways to offer the language, including Skype courses with other universities, Scott said he felt losing another language would be a huge blow to the program. He remained positive about his personal experiences with the Council, but raised concerns about Yale’s lack of

focus on a field of study that is becoming increasingly relevant. "The marginalization of Africa writ large in terms of how we talk about the world is kind of echoed here," Scott said. "I don't understand how a university with \$16 billion can't find the money to fund projects which, I think, are quite important."

Prior to the financial crisis, former chair Kamari Clarke said the Council was preparing to expand and meet the growing demand for more courses on Africa. However, financial considerations sidelined these plans, and the Council has yet to recover.

Council chair Christopher Udry remains optimistic. "One of the biggest changes that has happened since I've been here is that there are a lot more people in aggregate interested in topics having to do with Africa," Udry said. Research conducted by Council members remains at the top of its field — Rod McIntosh from Yale's Peabody Museum was a principal excavator of Jenne-Jeno, the oldest city in sub-Saharan Africa; History professor Daniel Magaziner wrote the definitive work on the intellectual history of South Africa; Kamari Clarke recently received a \$260,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to study human rights and justice in countries formerly ruled by warlords.

But despite these successes, the future of Yale's Council on African Studies remains uncertain. For those involved with the Council, the study of Africa is fundamentally intertwined with Yale's mission to internationalize its curriculum, and Council members and students have sought innovative ways to continue the caliber of its program and support student interest in the face of difficulties. "The continent is relevant and as we progress into what I assume will be a very difficult century ... the entire landscape of how people live, where they live, is all going to be shifting," Scott said. "To exclude Africa academically in any way is, I think, shooting yourself in the foot."

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