

**Melville Herskovits and the place
of the two Sudans in African Studies
and in the African diaspora**

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*Banquet lecture for the 37th annual conference of the Sudans Studies Association in
conjunction with the 70th anniversary of the Program of African Studies at Northwestern
University, May 12, 2018*

The idea for this lecture originated in Berlin at a conference in January 2018 where scholars, including anthropologists from the former East and West Germany, came together for the first time to discuss postwar ethnology/anthropology from 1945 to 1960 and the influence of Franz Boas who was featured prominently. Seventy years ago at Northwestern during the 1947–48 academic year Melville Herskovits, a student of Franz Boas, developed the concept of a discipline-based set of African/African American studies courses with the idea of a new Program of African Studies. With this initiative he created the first program of African studies in the United States, although other scholars, such as William Leo Hansberry at Howard University had taught courses in African civilizations from 1922 to 1959. Other institutions followed the Northwestern initiative in the 1950s, but the postwar major growth of African studies programs was affected primarily by both the politics of the Cold War and the great wave of the independence of African nations and decolonization of the continent from the 1950s to the early 1960s.

Under Boas' tutelage, Herskovits had already pioneered the study of linkages between the “the Negro in the New World” and West Africa, when he was hired at Northwestern University (NU) in 1927. He was already twenty years into his career at NU with his disciplinary background in the Department of Anthropology, which became the focus of this new program. Herskovits did not limit his inquiries to a narrow view of either Africa or Africans in the

Americas. He studied both the West African kingdom of Dahomey and the first Black Republic of Haiti in the New World. He also researched the cattle complex in East Africa as well as African survivals in the New World in Suriname and in the United States. In his seminal *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) he challenged the view that Africans in the Americas had lost all traces of African culture, thus opening an entirely new field of study that linked Africans in the New World directly back to Africa. Like Boas, he rejected racist ideas about the “natural” biological inferiority of Africans or their descendants and emphasized that race is primarily a sociological concept.

As I reflected in Germany upon Boas’ vigorous antiracism in his scholarship and personal life, Melville Herskovits came to mind as an appropriate subject for the 37th annual Sudans Studies Association (SSA) at my alma mater, Northwestern University. Richard and I were graduate students in anthropology and African studies there from 1968–73. I learned at the Berlin conference that both Boas and Herskovits assisted in bringing German scholars, both Jewish and non-Jewish, to teach in American universities during the Nazi period between the two world wars. Indeed in November 1938, Melville Herskovits sponsored a meeting of the National Conference of Christians and Jews to “protest the atrocities and inhuman treatment of minorities in fascist Germany.”

In Berlin I also learned of the visit of Martin Luther King on September 13, 1964, not only to an overflow crowd in West Berlin (invited by the pastor Henrich Grüber who had been an anti-Nazi activist), but also to a church in East Berlin, “Sophienkirche.” King famously declared in his East Berlin lecture in September 1964 that as America is healing its racial divide, so Germany can heal its ideological divide: “Here on either side of the wall are God’s children and no man-made barrier can obliterate that fact.” His words echo as true today as they were

fifty-four years ago. In December of that year King flew to Oslo to receive his Nobel Peace Prize.

Major ideas in Herskovits' scholarship as they related to Sudans' Studies

In his comparative research in Africa and the Caribbean Herskovits demonstrated the linkages between Africa and the New World territories of North and South America, the Caribbean and the US. His major work, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941: 30), established first and foremost that Africans have a great civilizational past, and that Africans in the Americas share in that past and are enriched by it in their present condition:

...let us suppose...that the Negro is a man with ...a reputable past...and that the civilizations of Africa, like those of Europe, have contributed to American culture as we know it today; and that this idea might eventually be taken over into the canons of general thought. Would this not... tend to undermine the assumptions that bolster racial prejudice?

Kush and Meroe come to mind as well as ancient Kerma with its round, African structures dating from c. 2500 BCE and the cattle cultures of ancient Sudan, living today in the cattle complex of the Sudans, both Baggara in the north and Dinka, Nuer, and others in the south. To understand the possible flow of culture from the south to the north, we need only be reminded of the natural flow of the White Nile. And from the highlands of Ethiopia comes the Blue Nile where the remains of some of the earliest humans have been discovered and studied, fully human as late as 100,000 years ago. Would it not be likely that these early humans dwelled within the borders of what we call the two Sudans when humans lived without borders?

African survivals

Prior to the critical scholarship of Herskovits and others, there was a fear that to point out African survivals outside of the continent might cause them to be regarded as vestiges of a “savage past”. Herskovits argued the contrary, that “their sophistication is seen in the spiritual life of Africans in the Americas; Africans refused to accept slavery,” Some see the Intermediate Periods in Egypt not only as transitions from one dynasty to the next, but as ancient rebellions against the tyranny of the pharaohs. Evidence in the Old Testament of Jewish exodus is a testimony to this fact, and the “Black Pharaohs” of the Sudanese 25th dynasty from Taharqa to Pianky bear witness in the same Holy Book. To the latter point Herskovits supported the early ideas of Herbert Aptheker for his 1944 Guggenheim fellowship, which he received to research his pioneering book, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (1951).

Indigenous African cultures had complex political systems, ranging from the segmentary lineages of the Dinka and Nuerto to the states and kingdoms of the Funj and the Shilluk.

Herskovits (1941: 299) wrote that these polities:

...comprise philosophically conceived world views and sustained cult rituals; and a high development of the arts, whether in folk literature, the graphic and plastic forms, or music and the dance (p.297).

[It is evident] that the traits that distinguish Italians or Germans, or Jews or Irish, or Mexicans or Swedes from the entire population of which they form a part are [no] different from those Americans with African heritage without a reference to [their] previous cultural heritage (p. 299).

“Comparative studies, which recognize the historical affiliations of Negroes of West Africa and all of the New World, must, especially for students in the United States, supplement the provincialism which refuses to look beyond the borders of a single country (p.299).

I urge you the first and second generation Sudanese and your children in the United States to study the great past and prepare for a great future by understanding it.

Africa in the Americas

Herskovits enjoyed a lengthy and warm relationship with the dean of Haitian anthropology, Jean Price-Mars, from 1928 to 1955. This began as Herskovits developed an interest in Caribbean and South American Negroes, after his original studies of the American Negro, and planned a period of research in Haiti. Price-Mars encouraged the young American scholar, responding generously to Herskovits' requests and to his questions about Haitian ethnology. Eventually, Herskovits conducted several months of fieldwork in Haiti in 1934 with Price-Mars arranging for the visit and hosting Herskovits and his wife, selecting the field location of Mirebalais, assisting with housing and introductions, and providing a senior ethnologist's advice, perspective, and scholarly resources. This resulted in the publication of Herskovits classic *Life in a Haitian Valley* (1937).

And since I am part of the Northwestern African Studies story, I have an indirect connection to Price Mars who was an admirer of the pioneering Haitian anthropologist Antenor Firmin whose early work of critical race thinking and anthropology, *De l'egalite des races humaines, anthropologie positive* (1885), was covered in my anthropology of race and racism class, translated into English with the title *The Equality of the Human Races, Positivist Anthropology* (2000; 2002) and has been received as a volume with both historical and contemporary value in anthropology and African and Afro-American Studies.

Professionalization of African Studies:

Initial funding for the Program of African Studies (PAS) came in the form of a \$10,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation in December 1948. Herskovits described the goals of the program as follows:

(1) The Program of African Studies would focus on all elements of African culture, with emphasis on cultural change due to external influences

(2) PAS would concentrate on training researchers in African studies. Toward that end Northwestern would host multidisciplinary seminars with international scholars of African studies. By the end of the first three-year grant PAS had trained students for African work/research and Africa-focused courses existing in several departments, and that the library would improve its Africa collection.

In August 1951 when NU submitted a grant request to Carnegie Corp for a \$33,000 annual grant for five years to establish a Program of African Studies, it observed that in 1950 in the entire US there were only two historians, one economist, one political scientist, two geographers, and about a dozen anthropologists primarily concerned with Africa. The new African Study Center would encourage research in Africa; maintain a library for Africana studies; train personnel; disseminate information concerning the continent; act as a clearing house for African information; and coordinate research in the field. Melville Herskovits was named director of the new center and the chair of the Interdisciplinary Committee on African Studies that would create the center. An undergraduate major in African studies would be established along with a PhD program (Gershenhorn 2004: 187, 189).

By this time Herskovits vied with competitors for leadership in African/African American Studies. Perhaps the sharpest competitor was Gunnar Myrdal dating back to differences between them in the Carnegie Study of the Negro in US. Other early leading Africanists were political scientist Roland Young and Herskovits' former student William Bascom. Herskovits was at times criticized as a "one-man show", but Northwestern resolved this tension with a strong interdisciplinary oversight committee with Herskovits still as head of the

program, while he played important roles in the success and sustainability of the Program of African Studies.

By 1951 Lincoln University, a historically black university (HBU) in Pennsylvania had established an Institute of African Studies, but Northwestern was already beginning to expand its academic mission to a pragmatic one in the post-Cold War era. Ford Foundation's focus was on the Cold War and it used this political context to make advances in African studies. Many politicians and policy experts believed that the USSR would attempt to extend its influence in Africa by supporting communist insurgents to topple colonial regimes. In 1955 Chester Bowles, then an aide to John Fitzgerald Kennedy, "supported a call for new African Studies programs." During the Eisenhower administration, Africa was considered an important Cold War battleground, and Vice President Richard Nixon followed saying that Africa "could well prove to be "the decisive factor" in the Cold War struggle. (Gershenhorn 2004: 191, 192).

In 1950 Herskovits, backed by the Northwestern administration, submitted a \$187,000 funding proposal to the Ford Foundation for a Program of Research and Training in African and African American Studies that would serve as a "historical laboratory for testing assumptions about contacts between people of different traditional backgrounds," adding that Africa has increased in global importance in terms of "natural resources and man-power potential." Two years later the Ford Foundation created the Foreign Area Fellowship Program, and by 1954 this program provided 300 fellowships for study and research in Africa, Asia, the Near East, the USSR and Eastern Europe. Herskovits can be credited not only with promoting the concept of a freestanding program of African Studies but also with the many ways and means of its implementation, institutionalization, and continuity. African Studies was becoming

institutionalized. In addition, the African Studies Association was founded in 1957, with Herskovits as its first president.

Northwestern University earned its early dominance in African studies the old-fashioned way by hard work and commitment. In 1961 a Ford Foundation grant for \$1.3 million ensured the program's stability. With continued Ford Foundation funding from 1953–1961, ten new African Studies programs were founded, and by 1967 forty programs were in existence with great effect on public higher education and on historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Today Northwestern's Africana Library collection is the preeminent one in the US and internationally, thanks to the dedication of leaders like Hans Panofsky and his most able successors David Easterbrook and Esmeralda Kale who have expanded the concept of an Africana collection to include indigenous African cultural items, maps, and special concept collections focused on major leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama.

Northwestern's Program of African studies has produced a number of African American scholars of considerable note such as distinguished ambassador and sociologist Hugh Smythe, anthropologist Johnetta Cole, a Herskovits student in the 1960s who became president of Spelman College in Atlanta, and historian Ibrahim K. Sundiata. Richard Lobban was friends with Jean Herskovits and the year I spent at the University of Pennsylvania brought me into close contact with Herskovits' then son-in-law Igor Kopytoff. Richard met alumnus Eduardo Mondlane (1961) in Tanzania who later became chairman of the Mozambique Liberation Front, and our first daughter is named for Josina Mutemba Machel as an expression of our solidarity with the decolonization of the continent. Northwestern has hosted many major African leaders and visiting lecturers and scholars, including former president of Ghana Kofi Busia, who in 1954 taught anthropology, and more recently the Emir of Kano, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi.

Birth of the Sudan Studies Association

It was thanks to Northwestern's pioneering efforts in African studies that my husband Richard and I as anthropology graduate students made the decision to conduct research in Sudan—then Africa's largest nation—encompassing so much of the continent's diversity. With deep gratitude to two generous grants generated through PAS we traveled to Sudan in October 1970 for our doctoral research and stayed until 1972. My research in the field of law was done under the tutelage of my mentor Paul Bohannan and Richard's ethnographic and social research on Tuti Island was supervised by Ronald Cohen as his dissertation chair. It was from the power and depth of those initial years that we developed, with our dear friend Constance Berkley of Fordham University, the idea of forming a Sudan Studies Association (SSA) in 1981, thirty-seven years ago. So, we are here at Northwestern in 2018 for our 37th consecutive meeting of the SSA, with international meetings held in Africa, Europe, and the US every three to five years ever since. We honor and revere the memory of dear Constance who came into Sudan Studies through her research on Tayeb Salih, the great Sudanese novelist.

The colonial legacy, regionalism and race within the African Studies and the two Sudans

Despite Herskovits deep sensitivity to issues of race and racism, the new field of African studies was nonetheless constituted of predominantly white scholars. Allegations of tokenism of Africans and African Americans were common in the new field (Gershenhorn, 2004). This factor was noted and critiqued in the dynamic era of the politics of the 1960s with the converging movements for civil rights; against the Vietnam War; and the second wave of feminism. The leadership and composition of the ASA) came to a head in its 1968 annual meeting in Toronto with a massive walk-out of black Africanists protesting the reality of a “whites studying blacks”

demographic cracking open an identity crisis in the young field that threatened to BREAK IT INTO TWO PARTS, an ASA for whites and a separate and inevitably unequal association for scholars of color. This created a complex relationship between African Americans and Africans on campus. Critics such as St. Clair Drake maintained that Herskovits did not especially recruit or train African Americans, (Gershenhorn 2004: 198), while also noting that these students tended to be more attracted to the study of American sociology.

Colonial and racial division of the continent

Of special relevance to the study of the two Sudans was the colonial and subsequent racializing of the continent into Arab/Muslim North Africa and “Sub-Saharan Black Africa”. While the development of African Studies in the US took many independent roads, it nonetheless followed the European colonial division of Africa along geographic, linguistic, and racial lines, perhaps for the convenience of working within existing paradigms. But they missed the opportunity to revise the colonial paradigm. The first African Studies Association meeting was at Northwestern University and focused on sub-Sahara, so-called “Black” Africa. The racializing of the continent, of a “lighter-skinned” “Arab” North with a ‘black’ African South antithesis has dogged the Sudan since its independence in 1956, and lies at the heart of the inequality between northern Arab-Muslim Sudan and African South Sudan. These two parts were formally separated under colonialism in 1933 by the Closed Districts Ordinance whereby Arabic language, Muslim religion, dress and culture were barred from the South during colonialism. Active Christian missionizing in the South, largely by Italian Catholic orders, resolved to a common reference to a “Muslim North” and “Christian South”, a dichotomy still used today while traditions associated with indigenous African faiths persist throughout the Sudans.

When independence of the Sudan was on the horizon in the late 1940's southern exclusion was already a fact. By the early years of independence in 1955–58, elites in the north—reliably coming from military ranks—seized power to govern the state, thus launching the first southern armed resistance. Northern identity politics veered from Nasserite Arab nationalism under Colonel Jaafar Nimeiry to a nascent Muslim-based Islamization, also under Nimeiry, that not only excluded non-Muslims but targeted them potentially as not full citizens. The instrument they used was the Shari`a, making the religious law of Islam a sword of political repression (Fluehr-Lobban, 1987; 2012). Under the Hasan Turabi–Omer al-Bashir alliance—after the third period of military rule in 1989—this grew to full blown Islamism as a final stage in the decades of ethnic-regional, racial, and religious division. This period, 1989–present, exacerbated nearly every racial, religious, and ethnic contradiction in the nation's history. It revived the civil war, was engineered into a “Comprehensive Peace Agreement” (CPA) by foreign actors in which it was supposed to make “unity attractive”—never seriously trying to do so—and effectively let the south go, ending with the separation into two countries, North Sudan and South Sudan. Mind you, this followed years of attempted peace negotiation from Abuja I and II, to Machakos and Naivasha, to the CPA in 2005 asking the North to “make unity attractive” **WHICH THEY DID NOT DO**, to the final result of the referendum on separation with a 99.9% YES vote. The Sudan Studies Association (SSA) in 2011 decided without any debate to continue as an organization for the two Sudans and simply added an “s” to our name.

I will always recall—and hold in the part of my heart that is reserved for Sudan—the tears in the eyes of our incoming president Lako Tongun as he recounted for us at the SSA in 2012 his unbounded joy at the independence celebrations in Juba. This from a son of South Sudan who was associated with the first resistance movement, Anya Anya, and knew John

Garang, and had left his home in the 1960s. The paradigm of a racially and religiously divided continent into Arab-Islamic North Africa and sub-Saharan Black Africa needs to be rewritten by our generation, and who better to do this than Sudanese and Sudanists.

It is well to remember that the Institute of Afro-Asian Studies was founded at the University of Khartoum in the still hopeful 1960s in the wake of the historic Round Table Conference in 1965, itself a product of Sudan's first popular revolution in 1964. It was inspired by Mohamed Omer Beshir, a northern scholar of the South who was active in Sudan government negotiations and influenced by the generation of intellectuals and activists that the 1964 Revolution spawned. After years of the loss of that spirit and a loss political imagination in governance by northern elites blinded by their narrow prejudices, southern leader Abel Alier, summed up southern disillusion with his 1990 book *Southern Sudan: Too Many Agreements Dishonored*.

As Abdullahi Gallab noted in *Their Second Republic* (2014), one of a definitive series of books on Sudanese modern history and governance, the message from the political leadership at the time of independence was that there are numerous inextricable links between Sudan and South Sudan: human attachments, political associations, religious affiliations, and different collective identities within the Sudanese greater human society. Quoting from an article by Noah Salomon (April 12, 2012), he described how Pagan Amum, Secretary General of the [SPLM], told the crowd at the independence ceremony

when he lowered the old Sudanese flag for the last time—in preparation for raising of South Sudan[’s] flag—that he would not be handing it over to Khartoum in gesture of good riddance, but rather would hold on to it...in memory of their shared history, the[ir]

shared struggle, and indeed the shared future that northerners and southerners have and would continue to experience together.

Role of the African diaspora in the US

Large African diaspora communities exist in nearly every major and intermediate city in the US, frequently now in their second or even third generation. The mothers and fathers have done the best they can to raise new generations of conscious African American to not forget their African heritage. The children of SSA president Souad Ali and former SSA president Abdallahi Gallab exhibit this consciousness, most notably their international “pop” star Ahmed Gallab whose professional name is “Sinkane” after Joseph Cinqué, the famous leader of the Amistad slave rebellion. In Rhode Island we have large diaspora communities from Liberia due to the decades of civil war and from Nigeria whose first-generation leaders formed both a Nigerian organization and an active group of Yoruba elders. Richard and I were honored in 2013 to be elevated to the status of honorary Yoruba elders.

I mention this to open the discussion of the potential of this second and third generation of African Americans whose consciousness is both different and similar to Black Americans. They do not carry the same burden of historic racism, but they do experience everyday American racism by virtue of their phenotype; however, they also share a great desire to learn more about African history and culture which is rarely found in any substantial form in the standard American curriculum. In the absence of institutional educational commitment to an African curriculum—except for the major example being honored here at Northwestern University—it continues to be our responsibility to carry forward what Melville Herskovits began here seventy years ago.

And as for the SSA itself, after thirty-seven years of offering an independent, nonpartisan forum for all Sudanese and all Sudanists from across the globe—with our presidents coming from all regions—we are well-positioned to serve as a vehicle for the potential generation of new relationships or federation in the future history of the two nations. This could begin as a kind of “Truth and Reconciliation” process akin to that which South Africa accomplished with great effect in the postapartheid era. A new era could be launched.

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