

**AFRICAN PASTS FOR AFRICAN FUTURES IN A TIME OF RADICAL
ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE:
A KEYNOTE ADDRESS ON HISTORY AND POLICY IN AFRICA'S
RECONSTRUCTION.**

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“Ever since Africa’s tragic encounter with Europe in modern times, each generation’s social imaginary of Africa, especially in the outside world, but sometimes within Africa as well, has been dominated by powerful metaphors and images through which Africa is constructed and consumed, *its histories and futures confiscated and condemned* (emphasis mine).”¹

“The celebration of a past in the singular, I would argue, and the suppression of an alternative history in the name of nation-building, opened the door for the emergence of the single party state and the politicization of ethnic identities in the post-colonial era. If there is an original sin that professional historians committed in this early period, it is simply the sin of not telling; of lies, and of distortion about our collective history and memory.”²

Framing a Debate

Writing this keynote address has been a fraught and sobering experience, heightened by an acute feeling of stepping outside my scholarly comfort zone in east and central African history before the 19th century CE. The discomfort encouraged me to shift positions, in this case from that of a scholar writing for a familiar audience to that of a critic embracing the risks and rewards of producing useful knowledge of Africa’s past. The critic itches to reveal what is implicit in or hidden by a particular argument or claim. That urge frames this exploration of why historical knowledge is central to African responses to radical environmental change. This question guided the composition of a year-long gathering of six Africa-based scholars, in 2002-2003, under the auspices of the Program on International Cooperation in Africa.³ In turn using

¹ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, **Manufacturing African Studies and Crises** (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997), iii.

² Arnold Temu, “Not Telling: African History at the End of the Millennium,” **South African Historical Journal** 42 (2000), 2.

³ With generous support provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

philosophical, historical, and hortatory terms I will indulge the chance to risk some thoughts on this large issue in a working paper.

The New Partnership for Africa's Development, adopted at a July 2001 summit meeting of African heads of state, explains that Africa's people are determined "to extricate themselves and the continent from the malaise of underdevelopment and exclusion in a globalizing world".⁴ Historical knowledge, policy-making, and reconstruction all haunt this determination. Do the goals of NEPAD reveal the special interests in posing fundamental questions shaping relations between the production of historical knowledge and the formation of policy? Do they reflect only one, very narrow, perspective on the relationship between the businesses of producing historical knowledge and making policy? Is there, in fact, a condition of general crisis between them, as suggested in the original call for Fellows announced by PICA (See Appendix 1)? Is it even worthwhile to ask about the relationship between historical knowledge and policy-making when so many are hard at work using both to meet the challenges of Africa's future?

Scholars and practitioners worry about the distinction between scholarship and political advocacy for good reason. Scholarship differs from advocacy because it embraces a commitment to incremental accumulations of knowledge drawn from analyzing and interpreting an empirical record, and a will to revise that knowledge in the light of new information. Advocacy embraces a commitment to a particular position or interest, devising strategies to promote or defend it that change in the light of new configurations of political power or resource flows. The precious boundaries between them are porous; they must not prevent us from marking unmarked categories and from telling histories of unequal power relations. Marking categories like popular historical knowledge and telling histories of poor rural communities constantly render the divide

⁴ For the full text of NEPAD, see <http://www.gov.za/issues/nepad.html>; this quotation is from **Africa Recovery** 16, 2/3 (September 2002), 28.

between scholarship and advocacy, between history and policy, a problematic one. The apparent absence of a complex sense of the past informing the stories we tell about the future in Africa raises considerable anxiety for scholars of Africa today. Is this absence something that afflicts only the young, the politically numb, those dumb with fear or those far from strife? Is the onus of historical relevance fairly placed on historians' backs? Or, must those who excuse historical knowledge explore the grounds on which they do so and the consequences of absent pasts for their futures?

The younger generation in Africa today—whether they have gone through formal educational systems or not—are rather disinterested in academic histories of Africa. If historical knowledge will have a role to play in policies shaping Africa's future, we should think about the implications of this condition of youthful disinterest for their engagement with the future. Which of the established themes in African history resonates—or falls flat—in contemporary Africa?



In a recent article, Stephen Ellis wonders about this very question.⁵ He asks that we rethink the historical centrality of the state in matters of social and economic development, a question that has fixed the attentions of conservative, liberal, and radical students of African political culture since the 1940s. It has also bedeviled approaches to Africa's precolonial social histories by subtly insisting that complex African histories are always histories of centralized states and their formation. They seem to insist that deep histories of centralized complexity be worn as a badge that gloriously refutes the denial of such a history. Of course, this denial lay at the conceited heart of colonial talk of a civilizing mission. But, if contemporary African states and their international supporters have had little positive impact on social and economic

⁵ Stephen Ellis, "Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa," *Journal of African History* 43, 1 (2002), 4-12.

development among Africa's poorest, then why continue primarily to write histories of states stretching far back into the African past?

It might be more useful in writing histories of the present to think about Africa's diverse forms of social complexity as complexity without centralization or, to put it in more positive language, as heterarchic and flexible complexities. The social histories of the greater Niger River Basin, at many different points in the past, are not solely stories of imperial power and expansionist militarisms. They include strong commitments to the benefits of occupational specialization in zones of extreme environmental uncertainty—such as in the clustered urbanisms of the Middle Niger Delta.⁶ In the Inner Congo Basin, as well, historians have revealed densely nuanced social histories of supple, innovative political cultures that have seized and directed agricultural and technological development, eclectic and responsive medical systems, and uniquely gendered social worlds.⁷

Arnold Temu implores us to tell a fuller story of Africa's diverse pasts. Stories of social complexity in the absence of states should be part of our answer to him. Equally importantly, we must tell about the conflicts and injustices that characterized these diverse pasts. We must agree with Claude Ake that looking toward past dreams that have remained stubbornly unrealized is often a means to avoid confronting pressing political challenges in the here and now.⁸ Denial is not only a river in Africa and it may be one of the reasons that younger generations in Africa seem disinterested in Africa's contemporary histories written by academics.

⁶ Roderick J. McIntosh, "Clustered Cities of the Middle Niger: Alternative Routes to Authority in Prehistory," in David Anderson and Richard Rathbone (eds.) *Africa's Urban Past* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Publishers and Oxford: James Currey Publishers, 2000), 19-35.

⁷ Jan Vansina, "Pathways of Political Development in Equatorial Africa and Neo-Evolutionary Theory," in Susan Keech McIntosh (ed.) *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 166-72; Kairn Klieman, "**The Pygmies Were Our Compass**": *Bantu and Batwa in West-Central Africa* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Publishers, 2003).

⁸ Claude Ake, *Democracy and Development in Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1996), 1-17, cited in Ellis, "Writing Histories," 7.

Too many historians working on issues of contemporary significance write about them in the shadow of past ideals. As Ellis has argued, if we do so, we are doomed to write about one failure after another. So, how can we write narratives of the African present without being complicit in promoting Afropessimisms? The ideal of national sovereignty and the necessity of a strong state for political and economic development were ideals created at the moment of independence and we might continue to promote them in our histories as if they still have the currency and force they once had. But the evidence to the contrary is overwhelming.

Thus, when Ellis announces that the central issue of contemporary African life—and of its still unwritten histories—is “how to secure an equitable public order” we should immediately ask two questions.⁹ First, with one foot in social science and the other foot in the humanities, what does history have to offer in this quest? Second, how can we draw on the fact that academic social science produces a sort of historical knowledge no longer attractive, if it ever was, to a wider public? In short, how might historians and policy-makers—whether or not they are one and the same person—query the argument that “a stable, prosperous and non-violent existence is the aim of all right-thinking people and that this is best ensured by public policy in a well-ordered state, one organized according to the western models that have become just about universally accepted, at least in theory.”¹⁰

The query might include the following issues. Mustn't we rethink histories of power and subjugation before blithely announcing the ascendance of a postmodern world, where power and subjugation might be discursive effects? Even if states and policies have grown fragmented and violent, and even if popular forms of historical knowledge, resistance or accommodation to the

⁹ Ellis, “Writing Histories,” 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

realities of structural violence are numerous and beyond the academy, mustn't we still write their histories as part of the process of imaging their futures?

Achille Mbembe recently has placed such questions at the center of a contemporary African intellectual agenda.¹¹ In his characteristically eclectic thinking, Mbembe asks us to reflect on whether contemporary state boundaries are the source of conflict and impediments to regionalism or if regionalisms have already developed, “from below” and at the margins of state control, regions that are actually international in their scope and have complex historical roots. Without discounting its importance, he queries the isomorphism of state and territory in order to move beyond thinking about “whether restructuring spaces of exchange does or does not contribute to the weakening of the state and to the erosion of its sovereignty.”¹² His goal is to understand how a multiplicity of conceptions of the territorial implies a multiplicity of superposed rights and social ties produced by the different forms of territory and how they together relate to new forms of political and economic order in contemporary Africa. Any one of these things—multiple definitions of territory, the rights and social ties that make them real, and their complex links to new forms of order—constitutes an historical theme with enormous implications for contemporary policy-making in Africa. For example, one might begin, as Mbembe has, to pursue into precolonial pasts the genealogies of private indirect government in order to highlight how they create entirely novel “systems of property and new bases of social

¹¹ Achille Mbembe, translated by Steven Rendall, “At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality and Sovereignty in Africa,” in Arjun Appadurai (ed.) *Globalization* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 22-51; *Idem*, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), *passim*. and Philippe Rekacewicz, “Mapping Concepts (Cartographie la pensée), translated by Anne-Maria Boitumelo Makhulu, in Appadurai (ed.) *Globalization*, 52-55.

¹² Mbembe, “At the Edge of the World,” 26. Mbembe announces what might be another challenge to historians of the contemporary, charting just what is new about the “new moral economy of individual pleasures [that] has developed in the shadow of economic decadence” (Mbembe, “At the Edge of the World,” 34.

stratification.”¹³ In short, the contemporary African histories that we need to write combine themes that are familiar and novel but highly charged with political power. Some of these have been written for this Workshop and we shall learn from them in our deliberations tomorrow.

So, how do scholars in the world of social science, with its roots in Euro-American social and intellectual history, engage with the politics of the knowledge they produce and with the politics of the settings that give that knowledge life? The notion of the activist-scholar, a commonplace in North America, reveals much in the way of an answer. For some, scholarship and activism are different sides of the same coin. For others, they represent irreducibly different sorts of work. Yet, not everyone at work in the world of social science may freely choose one or the other of these positions. Economic necessity, state intervention, and public accountability inform their politics of knowledge in ways that highlight its public face. This is especially true in Africa, where the historical relationships between the academy and national projects of building the state and the economy are particularly close. Since the 1980s, the “fiscal crisis of the state ravaged many of Africa’s once great universities and undermined the material security of the intellectuals,” and invited intense repression.¹⁴ In North America, patterns of individual accumulation and of state and private investment in the academy have produced an institutional hierarchy where the separation of knowledge from the politics of its production and dissemination is an option reserved for those with access to the most resources.

The stakes are high in thinking about how various forms of historical knowledge relate to political power. The stakes are perhaps higher still in thinking about how the possible contemporary African histories intersect with the politics of power at various temporal and spatial scales. Among these scales we should include the academy and a historical sense of its

¹³ Achille Mbembe, **On Private Indirect Government**, translated by Steven Rendall (Dakar: CODESRIA, 1999), *passim*.

¹⁴ Zeleza, **Manufacturing African Studies**, 27.

relation to the state and private capital. By linking the production of historical knowledge to the production of policy and placing both in dialog with African reconstruction, I hoped to push such issues into the foreground of our work here.

* * * * *

What do these concatenations and juxtapositions mean? African Reconstruction refers to the material challenges Africa and Africans face in a postcolonial setting and to the opportunities for pursuing radically new approaches to meeting those challenges. The idea of applying a notion of reconstruction to Africa is appealing as both an analogy and a practice.

As an analogy, Reconstruction in American history focuses our attention on the violent aftermath of the 19th century. In that century, conflict and conquest conditioned particular challenges with which Africans wrestle today as they work for an African future in which the unarmed people may restrain the free hand of the armed. Such a focus points to the peculiar qualities of postcolonial efforts at remaking Africa in that wake. And, it points up the possibilities for innovation and departure opened up by a passage through forms of destruction and uncertainty, which have become banal in some regions of Africa. Following Eric Foner, historians of the last 150 years of the U.S. have argued that Reconstruction represented "a sweeping redefinition of the nation's public life and a violent reaction that ultimately destroyed much, but by no means all, of what had been accomplished" by millions of men and women who were passing from slavery into a world where the promise of citizenship and economic and racial justice would attract and discipline their passions.¹⁵ These issues of inequality continue to mark today's world.

¹⁵ Eric Foner, **Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877** (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), xxvii.

The notion of Africa's Reconstruction raises questions about what was destroyed, the ways in which that destruction unfolded, and the conditions under which something like rebuilding may be conceived and begun. These are simultaneously historical questions and questions of policy and politics. They are also questions of practice. As Paul Zeleza reminds us, "deconstruction without reconstruction is a futile intellectual exercise" and what historical knowledge might help us do is deconstruct policy-making and reconstruct a sense of the social forces for justice.

Policy-making is about the goals, methods, and underlying organizing assumptions which guide state and non-state groups—in Africa and elsewhere—in tackling, avoiding, or redefining these challenges. Once social, economic, or environmental goals are set, other laborers in the policy world must identify and track indicators of relevant change in those fields. This focuses policy-making on outlining particular outcomes for particular problems. In the assessment phase, people must evaluate the nature of a policy's effects. In both instances, we must consider just who defines indicators of change and who assesses their effects.

Policy-making encodes multiple registers of values promoted by different interested parties to the process. These differences create gaps between policy and practice. This gap is the space where contingency, ambiguity, power, and their social fields, come into play. And, these things are the quintessential concerns of academic historical knowledge. They make histories of policy-making potentially riveting stories for the conflicts and collaborations they reveal. The gap between policy and practice is also the space where interested parties might elect to refer to historical moments as precedents or object lessons in order to win a point. This is the space where competing claims about historical process and the contents of change or the ingredients of cause may be put on the table. Organic or academic historians may or may not be present in

these negotiations, whether they unfold in an office high in a Ministry of Finance or the World Bank, or whether they unfold standing in the shade of a mango tree debating who will be interviewed that day about forest management issues. The forces shaping intersections in the nexus of policy-practice-historical knowledge are fluid. How to introduce historical knowledge in a way that sharpens and refocuses both policy contents and practice is something I hope we can explore at greater length tomorrow.

Policy studies—the normal province in which such questions are asked—might bridge social science knowledge, like historical knowledge, and policy-making, reform, and social engineering.¹⁶ The tension between historical knowledge and policy-making arises around questions of the manifest interests in any piece of policy and the commitment to neutrality or the much-hallowed notion of “objectivity” so dear to academic historical knowledge. This tension opens up the key terrain the Institute was designed to explore; but is it a tension that forms across a divide or along a continuum of relations between scholarship and advocacy. If scholars in the social sciences “hope” the knowledge they produce will serve “those whose business is advocacy”¹⁷ what are the ways in which historical knowledge offers entry-points into this terrain?

Guild historians and policy-makers who find themselves in conversation must explore the nature of academic and popular forms of historical knowledge and their relations to policy-making. What constitutes historical knowledge is a fraught question, not least because so many who struggle over it do so without noticing each other.¹⁸ Historical knowledge may be

¹⁶ Kenneth Prewitt, “The Social Science Project: Then, Now, and Next,” in Social Science Research Council, **A Report on Rethinking Social Science Research on the Developing World in the 21st Century** (New York: SSRC, 2001), 50.

¹⁷ Prewitt, “The Social Science Project,” 51.

¹⁸ See Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba, “How is Historical Knowledge Recognized?,” **History in Africa** 13 (1986), 331-44.

ubiquitous, but its power to command attention varies according to setting, convention, and speaker or author.

Guild historical knowledge generates evidence related to aspects of a topic or a question, from a broad range of sources, and tracks change and continuity in those aspects. The goal is to pose critical interpretations of the reasons for the observed changes and continuities over time. These interpretations tend to embrace notions of the incremental accumulation of change, the ambiguous, contingent, and contradictory movement of forces shaping change and continuity. Historians—academic and popular—employ the technique of narrative to emplot these proposals. To a greater or lesser degree, academic historians have accepted the slippage between narrative holisms and the thick flow of events and feelings that characterize experience, but they work very hard to explain actions in the past in terms demonstrably belonging to those past agents. Popular historians often seem unconcerned with such gaps and demonstrations, perhaps taking them as self-evident or overly complex. In reality, most people who encounter historical knowledge use it as a source to avoid what they think of as past mistakes and they use it to underscore the credibility of claims about contemporary issues. When they do this, they add new ideological weight to the narratives. They change those stories by adding their interests to those of earlier authors.

Local histories, biographies, autobiographies, and other popular forms of historical knowledge abound in an enormous variety of public spheres in Africa. They may have been produced by policy-makers themselves or they may have been produced as conscious interventions in conflicts where policy-making constitutes only one mode of intervention. This variety belies the oft-heard academic claim that their historical knowledge is politically

disinterested. Indeed, our elders in African history have done much work on both sides of this matter.

Historical knowledge that takes the form of gossip and rumor is a rich source for devising new approaches to policy. Rumor and gossip tend to attract the attention of powerful interests in Africa. Stephen Ellis has pointed out just how important the *radio trottoir*—literally, “pavement radio” or, with feeling, “the word on the street”—is to African governments “as a vital barometer of public feeling and a key component of power.”¹⁹ *Radio trottoir* has legitimacy, in part, because it is free from control by information management experts. And, it may not even take strictly oral forms. Many stories in African newspapers can be read as versions of *radio trottoir*. This is especially true for stories about any of a number of fraught topics, such as witchcraft, military violence, travel, and sex.

Ellis wants us to realize that *radio trottoir* and its paper versions are sources for identifying issues of burning significance to contemporary Africans. They are ways to put our historical fingers on the pulse of the street in order to produce histories that will compel persons in positions of power to listen because, like polls in the North, they are barometers of the diffuse truths that matter. Policy-makers and their implementers should listen to the word on the street for the same reasons historians should: such stories often serve as the basis for action because they represent attempts at making sense of social life. Their factuality is less important than their capacity to generate action.²⁰ And that is why politicians ignore the word on the street to their peril. The point is familiar and other stories fitting the bill easily come to mind. But Ellis insists that the challenge (to scholars, at least) lies in selecting coherent themes for research from among the cacophony of concerns on the street, on the radio, and in the newspapers.

¹⁹ Ellis, “Writing Histories,” 20.

²⁰ Luise White, “The Most Telling: Lies, Secrets and History,” *South African Historical Journal* 42 (2000), 11-25; Ellis, “Writing Histories of Contemporary Africa,” 22.

If contemporary power relations inflect the very form and content of historical knowledge by shaping choices about what problems in the past are worth studying, power relations in the past limit what historians can study today by destroying and suppressing varieties of historical experience and practice abhorrent to powerful persons and interests. The fate of the practice of public healing and its forms of knowledge is one well-known case in many parts of Africa.²¹ Just because we wish to know the roots of a contemporary issue of great concern, such as histories of spiritual practice and disembodied agency at work in witchcraft, does not mean we can easily find rich sources of evidence in conventional places like archives or interviews. Methodological approaches to the comparative study of linguistic and ethnographic evidence, archaeological, oral tradition, and paleoenvironmental information may be required. These once ubiquitous and increasingly common methods in guild African historiography promise temporally deep and spatially extensive histories of intellectual and social life.²²

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Sometimes, the people who produce history and policy are the same individuals. Yet, they may not be the ones who carried out the research or who are responsible for implementation and assessing outcomes or for publication, dissemination, and education. Historical knowledge—whether from the street or from the library—provides nuance, complexity, and contradiction to analyses of burning contemporary problems like environmental or health “crises” or various forms of violence and the crafting of policies aimed at these issues. The restraint often applied to matter of causal explanation in academic historical writing make assumptions concerning

²¹ Steven Feierman, “Colonizers, Scholars and the Creation of Invisible Histories,” in Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (eds.) **Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture** (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 200-209.

²² See David L. Schoenbrun, “Conjuring the Modern in Africa: Durability and Rupture in Histories of Public Healing between the Great Lakes of East Africa,” **American Historical Review** 111, 5 (2006), 1403-39, for an overview.

causality at work in a given piece of policy seem blunt. The market of ideas in which guild historians exchange ideas values the realism that ambiguity, irony, contingency, and contradiction lend historians their rhetorical styles. It values the discipline that these existential realities place on historians' analytic predispositions. Popular forms of historical knowledge, on the other hand, trade on enduring themes of human drama which contain important statements on what is worth studying now. These statements are crucial for contesting and revising policy initiatives, because they form an arena of debate with great force. With these very broad frames in place, their value for framing a debate about history and policy and reconstruction emerge most clearly in the context of a particular issue, like environmental change and its counterpart, environmental crisis.

The Context of Environmental Crisis

“The first lesson is that the main source of environmental destruction in the world is the demand for natural resources generated by the consumption of the rich (whether they are rich nations or rich individuals and groups within nations)...The second lesson is that it is the poor who are affected the most by environmental destruction.”²³

“If every organism is not so much a discrete entity as a node in a field of relationships, then we have to think in a new way not only about the interdependence of organisms and their environments but also about their evolution.”²⁴

One hears virtually everywhere these days a drumbeat of concern for “the environment,” most often in the guise of talk about “global warming” or “climate change.” Social scientists, politicians, musicians, and artists working in all media talk about environmental change, in one way or another, because they believe it will have an impact on every corner of Africa and the rest

²³ Anil Agarwal, Journalist, 1986, cited in Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, **Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South** (London: Earthscan Publications, 1997), 3.

²⁴ Tim Ingold, **The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill** (London: Routledge, 2000), 4.

of the globe.²⁵ The implications it will have for African efforts to secure a stable political order are profound.

Talk of global environmental crisis has grown common in the last fifteen years. Perhaps emblematic of this, a recent issue of the London-based magazine, **The Ecologist**, carried a series of stories highlighting the sorry state of global pollution, climate change, waste management, deforestation, land degradation, fresh water supplies, biodiversity, fisheries, nuclear waste and radiation. They take the U.S. government to task for “highjacking” a recent Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development. They wonder if “science and technology” are the answers to these problems or if “our” reliance on them forms the principal problem. And they propose a number of solutions, including eating locally produced food, limiting privatization of basic social services, punishing corporate greed, educating economic leaders about the contradictions implicit in the argument that growth is central to environmental health. They even claim that “history shows” that “the little guys always win in the end....”²⁶ Their suggestions may constitute a compelling array of options for the way ahead—if mostly for Northerners—but a measure of cynicism seems warranted. What is the likelihood that world economic leaders—whoever they are—stand ready to rethink the centrality of growth to capitalism? In either case, the message is clear: things are a mess and the entire world must take notice.

²⁵Thomas Callaghy, Ronald Kassimir, and Robert Latham (eds.), **Intervention and Transnationalism in Africa: Global-Local Networks of Power** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Peter Uvin, **Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda** (West Hartford, CT.: Kumarian Press, 1998); Alberto Arce and Norman Long (eds.), **Anthropology, Development and Modernities: Exploring discourses, counter-tendencies and violence** (London: Routledge, 2000); Carole L. Crumley (ed.) **Historical Ecology: Cultural Knowledge and Changing Landscapes** (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1994).

²⁶ See Matilda Lee, “State of the Planet,” **The Ecologist** 32, 7 (September, 2002), 6-11; and Simon Retallack, “Why Are We Failing the Planet?,” **The Ecologist** 32, 7 (September, 2002), 12-17. This magazine is a child of the 1970s environmental movement, begun in the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe.

However, Jane Guyer and Paul Richards warn that crisis talk is “an occupational hazard to which conservationists are as vulnerable as relief agency personnel”.²⁷ Crisis talk must be resisted precisely because it closes down careful study of current and past conditions of change and improvement.²⁸ Historical knowledge can limit the reductionisms of crisis-talk and of policy-making, not so much by balancing them with sobriety and qualification but, rather, by sharpening and redirecting energies and ideas to better meet the challenge of the undeniably sweeping global changes in climate and ecology. If crisis-talk and policy-making share a predilection for bluntly interested pragmatisms, then historical knowledge may sharpen or deflect their blows, in part by ensuring that the ineffably local does not get erased by the inevitably global.

For example, the geography of vulnerability, described starkly in Agarwal’s epigram, seems especially telling in the context of the global climatic shifts now unfolding. Global climate shift challenges us to think in an integrated manner about physically global processes whose local effects will vary but will vary in accordance with other scalar dimensions of local processes, such as inequality, violence, and mobility. As Richard Schroeder argues, in a recent study of local response to structural adjustment in The Gambia, we must not allow such a proposition to subordinate “the needs and desires of people in particular localities to ‘global’ imperatives”.²⁹ Schroeder explains that African environmental activism has returned to the local community as a site of resistance to this subordination. International efforts to impose conservation regimes on African water resources, forests, and wildlife have pushed out local and

²⁷ Jane Guyer and Paul Richards, “The Invention of Biodiversity,” *Africa* 66, 1 (1996), 2.

²⁸ Even the very best of the popular histories of crisis must compress complexity into lean hypotheses of cause. See Jared Diamond, *Collapse* ().

²⁹ Richard A. Schroeder, “Community, Forestry and Conditionality in The Gambia,” *Africa* 69, 1 (1999), 1; Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), *passim*.

state actors and interests. The response has been to focus planning and implementation efforts directly on specific communities or localities.

Revised environmental policy has served different interests—from bio-prospectors to rent-seeking states, as well as international groups such as the World Wide Fund for Wildlife. But, according to Schroeder, all these groups share an interest in establishing the building blocks of civil society as part of a larger design on “consolidating the gains on the post-Cold War African political landscape.” They all rely on the centrality of the local or of the community in formulating their environmental policies.³⁰ In the local these groups find the seeds of a new civil society, where local critiques of “the global environmental crisis” and the policies designed to thwart it meet each other most tellingly. Reduced state revenues in Africa, combined with expanded international expectations for conservation, place the community and the locality at the center of these struggles over resources.

Such struggles invite us to think again about the boundaries between nature and culture. At a very deep level, this divide structures struggles over resources by placing people somehow beyond nature—where resources reside—even though nature somehow enfolds society as well. Abandoning or resisting that binary—by working to redefine it—might help meet the challenge of reconstructing Africa’s environmental resources by opening up new ways to think about human life. One scholar, the anthropologist Tim Ingold has been trying to “find a way of talking about human life that eliminates the need to slice it up into...different layers.”³¹ Ingold worries about how social scientists slice up human life into “the organism, the person, and psychology”.

³⁰ See Schroeder, “Community, Forestry and Conditionality,” 2; Richard Peet and Michael Watts, “Liberation Ecology: Development, sustainability, and environment in an age of market triumphalism,” in Peet and Watts (eds.) **Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development and Social Movements** (London: Routledge, 1996), 10-11; Nancy Peluso, “Coercing Conservation?,” **Global Environmental Change** ?, ? (June, 1993), 199-217. Just what constitutes these categories is not always clear analytically or empirically; see Barrie Sharpe, “‘First the Forest’: Conservation, ‘Community’, and ‘Participation’ in South-West Cameroon,” **Africa** 68, 1 (1998), 25-45.

³¹ Tim Ingold, **The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill** (London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

As a starting point for unpacking the nature/society bundle, he wants to throw out the divide between populations—composed of organisms—and relationships—formed by persons (in the medium of society and culture). Ingold argues that, “if persons *are* organisms, then the principles of relational thinking, far from being restricted to the domain of human sociality, must be applicable right across the continuum of organic life.”³²

This notion is intrinsic to the task of historians. We devise an ontology that allows us to show how characteristics of pasts interacted with each other and, in so doing, generated their distinctive qualities. What is unique to academic historical knowledge is a commitment to revealing this process, how meanings and motives arose in the past “as emergent properties of the fields of relationship set up through their (peoples) presence and activity within a particular environment”. The organism-person grows and develops “in an environment furnished to them by the work and presence of others.”³³ Skill, dwelling, and livelihood are the means and manifestations of practices and knowledge, regenerated in each generation. Ingold is asking us to look away from idioms of continuity and change as transmissions from generation to generation or as breaks in such transmissions. He wants to foreground the novelty of each generation’s lived experience as the medium for making historical knowledge, even if historians may come along later and notice continuities and changes across generations.

Radical new theoretical approaches must be embraced by social science in the context of environmental crisis and they might draw on Africa’s own intellectual and philosophical traditions to do so. But, it will not be an easy matter to institutionalize local knowledge because their intellectual structure may depart profoundly from the authoritative academic worlds of science and social science. States and organizations will struggle to accommodate intellectual

³² Ingold, *The Perception*, 4.

³³ *Ibid.*

diversity, but they must do so in order to benefit from the knowledge of place and territory that they carry. The concept of “biodiversity” exemplifies these challenges.

In a 1996 article in **Africa**, Jane Guyer and Paul Richards explored the social construction of the concept of “biodiversity” in northern contexts. They asked us to consider the implications for social and ecological change of seeing the content of expert, local knowledges as discontinuous with the discursive circuits through which generalizing principles—like the notion of biodiversity—moved and accumulated authority—over, say, the work of conservation. Their central point is that the systematic nature of scientific knowledge “seeks levels and terms of analysis that will—increasingly systematically and parsimoniously—comprise wider ranges of phenomena within the same explanatory framework.” Lay knowledge of the biological realm—the realm in which the concept of biodiversity does its systematic and parsimonious work of explaining—tends to be organized differently “and in discrete domains.” The principles that might link domains are established easily through empirical observation. To reduce a complex argument to a few pithy truisms, understanding local knowledge is no simple matter, even in this age of the will to globalism. Local knowledge “may not work by an integrated set of deterministic principles applicable to all domains...; it may be socially dispersed in particular ways; the difference between expertise and culture needs to be maintained.”³⁴ We have said as much about modes of historical knowledge and we might say the same about modes of making policy, especially if that activity is removed from the sole proprietary locus of states or multinational interests and their institutions.

It may be more important for the future of environmental adaptations and innovations to explore the ways in which historical knowledge and policies are incommensurable rather than to think only about how to “use” historical knowledge to “sharpen” or “revise” policy. The latter

³⁴ Guyer and Richards, “The Invention of Biodiversity,” 4-5.

view flattens the potential pool of creative critique by insisting on a single dialogue when the conversation is actually a motley crew of contending voices, rather than a monolithic exercise in consensus and compromise.³⁵ In order to sort out this cacophony of contending voices, we must account for the social situation of each speaker and the conventions and institutions that grant them authority over the past. Privilege and authority mix most visibly at the points where the academy and the state require each other to function.

Choosing a temporal and regional frame for an historical problem helps determine the fate of historical knowledge in shaping effective policy-making. Understanding the character of environmental change and its impact on resource use and management is a good case in point. Juxtaposing different regions and periods of time reveals otherwise invisible forces and trends. Roderick J. McIntosh, an archaeologist of West African urbanisms with an historian's sensibilities, has shown how pulsed climatic change is deeply implicated in the formation of clustered urbanisms and in the growth of the eclectic agro-pastoral-artisanal-intellectual articulated specializations in the greater Middle Niger Delta—including the Méma and southern Sahara—beginning six or seven millennia ago. Reminiscent of Fernand Braudel's notions of time—*événement*, *conjoncture*, and *longue durée*—McIntosh used time scales of 10, 100, and 1000 years to “see” different layers of these larger historical processes. The shorter frame saw radical swings in climate regimes. The frame of the century saw emergent trends in wet or dry regimes or in transitions between them. It was only in the frame of the millennium that the scholar could speak of something like a stable climatic regime, whether wet or dry.³⁶

³⁵ I borrow from S. Atran, **Cognitive Foundations of Natural History: Towards an Anthropology of Science** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 49 and 57, as quoted in Guyer and Richards, “The Invention of Biodiversity,” 4.

³⁶ Roderick J. McIntosh, **Ancient Middle Niger: Urbanism and the Self-Organizing Landscape** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 73-89.

The specific importance of the content of this historical knowledge lies in its conjoining of “indigenous knowledge systems” with human ecology and social histories of technology to provide detailed information on how articulated specializations cheat the threat of environmental uncertainty and oscillation through underwriting the logic of risk minimization. These facts help to argue strongly in favor of promoting a basic respect, in state and international policy circles, for risk-minimizing strategies as part of coordinating larger efforts at “development.”³⁷

Legacies of risk, loss, innovation, and creativity remind us that much historical knowledge of great relevance has vanished or has been actively suppressed and destroyed. And these missing pasts haunt the future in many ways. The violence of the long century of conquest and colonial rule, beginning in 1850, contained its own logics for the suppression of knowledge and practice deemed abhorrent or terrifying to colonials and missionaries—like forms of public healing—or useless in the new order of things—like barkcloth clothing or iron smelting and the forest management skills that its production required.³⁸ The even longer currents of violence and dislocation associated with slavery and enslavement and the more recent chapters of state and private violence have effaced entire repertoires of knowledge and practice from the historian’s canvas. These things can be reconstructed, after a fashion, but often only in tantalizing sketches.

Missing pasts did not go missing in one fell swoop. Their disappearance took time and involved many different interest groups. A somewhat extended example of control over lands north and west of Lake Victoria over the last twenty-five centuries and more, reveals that many issues of pressing concern to policy-makers and many hot topics on the street have histories that are very difficult to recover.

³⁷ Claude Raynaut (ed.) *Sahels: Diversité et dynamiques des relations sociétés-nature* (Paris:Karthala, 1997), 188-97, 352-69.

³⁸ Feierman, “The Creation of Invisible Histories,” 181-216; Peter Schmidt (ed.) *The Culture and Technology of African Iron Production* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995).

Rights of forest access or rights to other communally held lands were contested, especially around the struggle to institutionalize privately held individual rights to landed property, beginning very early in the 20th century and prominently, with the Buganda Agreement. In a new book on the social history of land in Buganda, Holly Hanson has pointed out how all categories of land—farmland, waste land (areas depopulated by the years of war in the 1880s), uncultivated land, and forests—were in play as Ganda chiefs negotiated with the British over their future.³⁹ Hanson shows clearly the ways in which negotiations over the Uganda Agreement resulted in radical shifts of authority whereby chiefs gained the capacity to give land to others—an authority long claimed by kings and queens—and defended that authority against encroachments. Their administrative expansions redistributed power vertically, but not toward a center occupied by a royal. Instead, control over land gave life to social relationships. So, the new mode of control offered through the form of abstract units called “*mailo*”—from the miles that measured their newly squared boundaries—became the medium for establishing this new hierarchy. New, more powerful positions in the chiefly hierarchy carried with them more status and responsibility. These burdens required that new office holders take additional lands.

We see here, again, how charting changing routes of access to resources also clearly maps changing registers of power. In this instance, Ganda chiefs undertook a massive act of translation through which they sought to retain the link between land and social relationships, a link that had formed the moral core of their power for many centuries, even while institutionalizing the intransigently atomized world of rational economic actors that came with documented individual freehold title to *mailo* land. They sought to have their modernity and tradition and eat them, too, even if commoners and lower chiefs did not at first grasp the fact that

³⁹ Holly Hanson, **Landed Obligation: The Practice of Power in Buganda** (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003), 169.

the new allocations would be permanent and not negotiable through the moral language of mutual obligation.

Of the many different activities that have taken place in Uganda's forests, over the last 2500 years and clearly since at least the 16th century, hunting stands out for its association with class standing. One of the most persistent ethnic stereotypes in the region concerns the Batwa, forest-based hunters who occupy a stop on today's tourist itinerary along with viewing big game, wilderness, and high mountains. Many in Uganda consider Batwa to embody the very soul of poverty.⁴⁰ They occupy the bottom rung on the ethnic ladder of societies in Burundi, Rwanda, and in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. In many other parts of the Inner Congo Basin, often under other ethnonyms, forest-specialists have been placed on the lower rungs of a ladder of humanity. The historical contexts that helped to generate the association between Batwa and forests are ancient and highly variable. What is consistent about them, to the best of my knowledge, is precisely that that connection has been linked closely with changing political economies of power that have placed and continue to place Batwa at the furthest remove from the ceaseless flows of merchant and other forms of capital.

The example of forest histories and policies on forest use in Uganda opens up questions of the contested meanings given by all interested parties to the "resource" in question.⁴¹ The edges of semantic fields describing categories like "bush", "forest", and "nature", to name only a few, will blur differently for different speakers and communities of speakers. They will seem sharper or fuzzier depending on where one stands when answering the question. For example, the further away one is from "the forest" the more uniform it seems. When one is standing inside a

⁴⁰ Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Process, **Learning from the Poor: A Summary of Key Findings and Policy Messages** (Kampala: Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, 2000), 19.

⁴¹ For more on this issue, see Alphonse Otieno, "Ordering and Counter-Ordering," **Africa Today** (2008).

canopied forest, the single term is too blunt to be helpful in thinking about the place.⁴²

Describing such differences and overlaps prepares the way for a mutually intelligible dialog between the parties with interests in forests. The changing contents of these semantic fields—and ethnographies of speaking with them—will reveal much of great value about historical experience and how it is conceptualized.

Discourses of firstcomers and newcomers in a territory strongly shape attitudes toward rightful controllers of forest resources. Perhaps unsurprisingly, members of well-established descent groups feel strong moral authority over the disposition of forest resources and over issues of access to forests. Young people and newly resettled persons might feel differently. In the open forests of southern Bunyoro, in west central Uganda, in the mid-1990s, many newly settled persons from southwestern Uganda and Rwanda were clearing trees to found new homesteads and farms. Older Banyoro families had ambivalent attitudes toward this industrious disturbance of “their” lands. Some were a bit embarrassed by how hard the newcomers worked. They felt that older Nyoro families should be developing their own kingdom. Some felt grateful that economic activity had come to Buynoro. The families doing the heavy work of clearing trees and stumps felt strongly that their sweat amounted to a form of equity in the land and its surrounding forests even though they were sorry to have had to leave their home areas.⁴³

Everyone I talked with seemed to agree that these homesteads were located in the “deep bush”, a location about which considerable ambivalence existed. The “deep bush” was sometimes a liminal place—where persons with difficult illnesses might repair for treatment or

⁴² Sharpe, “‘First the Forest’,” 28-30.

⁴³ This is based on impressions gained from conversations with both newcomer and established families in Bunyoro in 1996 and 1997. In her study of southwestern Cameroonian forest management struggles, Sharpe discovered that individuals living near forests had career aspirations that tended toward the police or army (for men) and trading or nursing (for women). Sharpe (“‘First the Forest’,” 32) concluded that these “suggest quite strongly nationalist and authoritarian ideas about control of the forest.”

recovery or death. Other times it was a place of failure to which people, especially young people, had to retreat having lost chances in town. At still other times, the “deep bush” was a place of some peace, especially for some older persons who felt an abiding authenticity to life there. Mostly, though, my impression is that the “deep bush” is a place one wants to be able to leave whenever one likes. Most do not want to become stuck there.⁴⁴

Over the last century, the enemies of Uganda’s forests have been, variously, the state, hunters, timber companies, farmers, and pitsawyers. International conservation groups try to work with the state after some dismal experiences with coercive measures, such as resettlement efforts (from early in the 20th century). But, local resistance has been fierce and budgets have been tight, leading to the familiar emphasis on local or community participation without necessarily sharpening policies on sustainability, conservation, or rural development.⁴⁵

But identifying enemies or comrades in the business of forest conservation begs the question of describing multiple perspectives and defining shifting interests of groups and individuals. This is a task that historians are particularly good at. Yet, they must also draw on all forms of historical knowledge in order to do so and those forms must include local versions. These versions are absolutely central to the task, as yet largely undone, of writing an intellectual history of changing perceptions of the environment and of categories like “resources” and “forests” and of the social institutions through which they come to have meaning and value and through which those meanings and values change. Institutions and identities like “the person,” “home,” “wealth,” and “health” must form the equivalents to biological, botanical, and hydrological notions like “drainage,” “catchment,” “plant community,” and “ecosystem” and to

⁴⁴ For knowledge of ‘the bush’ as a source of social and exchangeable capital, see Kathryn de Luna, “Collecting Food, Cultivating Persons: Hunting and Fishing Among the Botatwe Farmers of Central Zambia, 1000 BCE to 1800 CE,” Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, in progress.

⁴⁵ Sharpe, “‘First the Forest’, 25-45.

economic and political notions like “the market,” “the interest group,” and “profit.” At this point, we know far more about the last two sets of concepts than we do about the first bunch. Historical knowledge can help change that, but the work has largely still to be carried out.

Medicine collecting, barkcloth preparation, and gathering wood for canoe-building also stand out for their specialized and basic importance to large numbers of communities living in and near forests. Barkcloth was once the principal export from Buganda and Buhaya to ports on the eastern portions of Lake Victoria. Canoes were vital in the transport of goods and troops throughout the *ecumene* formed by Lake Victoria. But, the policies of enclosure of forest lands did not begin with conquest or colonial rule, but they “fundamentally violated rural, class-bound assumptions of justice and morality,” especially once the transition to capitalist relations was well underway in the region, after the 1910s.⁴⁶ In the early 20th century in Buganda, the Lukiko (a Parliament) attempted to grant title to lands containing shrines of departed kings to the individual names of departed kings. In effect, they tried to create a national park of Buganda, held by departed kings and complete with the people who happened to be living there, farming and minding the shrines. As Hanson relates in her fascinating book, the Ganda chiefs’ struggles with the British over whether or not *mailo* land could be owned by deceased parties actually constituted the most poignant and wrenching aspects of their grand effort at translation. This effort ultimately foundered on the irreconcilable qualities of private, individual freehold that constituted *mailo* land, on the one hand, and the complex concatenation of historical and social forces contained in clan control—and through them, of the authority of the dead—over lands, like *butaka* lands, on the other hand.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Roderick Neumann, **Imposing Wilderness** (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 37.

⁴⁷ Hanson, **Landed Obligation**, Chapter 5. For a deep history of motherhood in this part of eastern Africa, which examines the centrality of gender to political culture, see Rhiannon Stephens, “A History of Motherhood, Food Procurement and Politics in East-Central Uganda to the Nineteenth Century,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern

Historians might explore the ways in which resistance to state attempts to control access to resources and land masked tensions of class, gender, and generation in potentially affected communities. Does a focus on these larger, external threats mask understanding of the internal politics in communities threatened by radical economic and environmental change?⁴⁸ Histories of these processes must expose the cleavages that conflicts can hide—and, just as importantly, the contradictory versions of history and tradition that they support—if they will prepare the way for critical engagements with policy-revision. This has to do with the fact that conflicts across lines of unequal power—like the power to gazette forests and surveil their use—generate ambiguous and deliberately hidden responses from the weaker parties.⁴⁹ In the context of a discussion about resistance, Steven Feierman noted that: “There is good reason for everyday resisters to *avoid* stating their intentions openly if they are to be effective....For resistance to be effective, it *must* frustrate the historian.”⁵⁰ The relevant point here is that the methodological challenge of producing historical knowledge relevant to engaging policy revision is perhaps most acute at precisely the points where policy revision needs historical knowledge: the local and fraught contexts in which people engage inequality, injustice, and the stripping of rights of citizenship.

The pressure on the local as the wellspring of “development” efforts—especially those aimed at natural resource control—in a time of structural adjustment or in a time of decentralization runs the risk of deepening the very divides between the privileged and the dispossessed that it seeks to dissolve. A cash-strapped state limits local access to resources

University, 2007; see also Rhonda Gonzales, “Continuity and Change: Thought, Belief, and Practice in the History of the Ruvu Peoples of Central East Tanzania, c. 200 B.C. to A.D. 1800” (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), e-book.

⁴⁸ Neumann, **Imposing Wilderness**, 42.

⁴⁹ Timothy Mitchell, “Everday Metaphors of Power,” **Theory and Society** 19 (1990), 545-77; Allen Isaacman, “Peasants and Rural Social Protest in Africa,” **African Studies Review** 33, 2 (1990), 1-120.

⁵⁰ Steven Feierman, **Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania** (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 42.

through restricting membership in the group who makes decisions about access. Local historical knowledge can be one means to exert accountability on rural authorities responsible for policy implementation and for inducing and directing participatory approaches.⁵¹ It can thus subvert the insidious devolution of the costs of “development” onto the local community mandated by structural adjustment and decentralization by configuring the terms of accountability.

One scholar, Jesse Ribot, has noted continuities between colonial approaches to the “indirect rule” of “native tribes” and participatory approaches to decentralized rural development. These continuities suggest strongly that enfranchisement should replace “administration” in matters of rural development. For, as Ribot has argued, “the two critical characteristics of enfranchisement are downward accountability of local authorities and their empowerment through the control of valuable resources and significant decision-making powers.”⁵² Ribot looks closely at how legal codes—rooted in colonial-era arrangements—circumscribe accountability. Local historical knowledge will be central in establishing the terms of critique and accountability.

Indeed, bringing local communities into debates over resource use has democratized that process, but can local knowledge really be used to counter colonial and postcolonial degradation narratives? Perhaps not, suggests Tamara Giles-Vernick, in a recent book. She argues cogently that indigenous knowledge does not necessarily embrace ecologically sound, i.e. sustainable practices.⁵³ Indeed, both the content and forms of knowing environments and organizing their use or exploitation change. The important question remains: what are the many relationships between knowledge and practice? What conditioning factors produce what causal links between

⁵¹ Jesse Ribot, “Decentralization, Participation and Accountability in Sahelian Forestry: Legal Instruments of Political-Administrative Control,” *Africa* 69, 1 (1999), 23.

⁵² Ribot, “Decentralization,” 25.

⁵³ Tamara Giles-Vernick, *Cutting the Vines of the Past: Environmental Histories of the Central African Rain Forest* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), 6-7.

them? How can intellectual histories of environmental perception and use—histories that will have to include very different systems of biological knowing—influence policy making on these matters? What can they contribute to improving such policies, to extending the indigenous African project of continuing to reinvent democracy in the hands and mouths of subjugated and excluded groups?

Recent work by James Fairhead and Melissa Leach and by Tom Struhsaker has shown that historical research on the importance of biodiversity in sustaining social reproduction implies that the state should redirect subsidies and inputs to agriculture away from price supports and toward paying for conservation compliance.⁵⁴ The importance of participation by the people affected by policies has proved that farmers and herders themselves must be integrated into the risk/reward structure of policy concerning matters such as conservation by being given a broader role in framing and implementing environmentally sensitive practices. One example, offered by the geographer Ian Bowler, is potentially quite interesting for Africa. He argues that the locus of environmentally protective practices should be shifted away from creating wilderness or national parks and protecting them to focus on large pieces of rural farmland and pasture.⁵⁵ Increasing species diversity and investing in vegetation improvement schemes has been a hallmark of African systems of intercropping. States should invest in this by targeting marginalized farmers, especially those in zones that have suffered long from instability, violence, and much internal displacement. Their practices may well expose fallacious narratives of environmental degradation and collapse.

⁵⁴ Tom Struhsaker, **Ecology of an African Rainforest: Logging in Kibale and the Conflict between Conservation and Exploitation** (Gainesville, FL.: University Press of Florida, 1997), 9-12; James Fairhead and Melissa Leach, **Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savannah Mosaic** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 280-95.

⁵⁵ Ian Bowler, "Developing Sustainable Agriculture," **Geography** 87, 3 (2002), 208.

Lastly, it is important to note that historical knowledge will form one of the richest threads for understanding local debates over policies aimed at aspects of Africa's Reconstruction—like so-called “natural resource conservation”—with complex interests that intersect and overlap at different spatial scales. Together with political knowledge, historical knowledge will either highlight explicitly or smuggle in implicitly the legacies of conflict that can be flattened by policy-making at a distance. Carefully crafted research plans will invite these sorts of historical discourses into the arena. Only equally carefully crafted political praxis will ensure that their motley character will be part of an African future that departs from the present in ways beneficial to the poorest groups and places on the continent.

Improving the chances for success in reconstructing African economies and environments rests in no small way on bringing the widest array of possible histories and historical knowledge into the policy-practice nexus. We must foreground the collision of an expanded international call for conservation efforts in Africa with the impact of structural adjustment protocols on state resources as creating a circumstance where local, community, and academic historical knowledge gain new uses and with that utility, they gain new authority. How can historical knowledge of the social life of environments, across multiple time scales, and based on different ontological and phenomenological principles, force us to revise current policies and practices in Africa's forests? To what extent do current policies and practices invoke, invent, and inveigle historical knowledge and precedent as underpinnings? Lastly, whose historical knowledge comes into play and brings with it the authority of multiple perspectives implicit in hearing multiple narratives?

These are all big questions and they render a neat conclusion impossible. So, I shall try for a summary, of sorts, instead.

Conclusion: Bridging Policy and History

“Democracy understood as the access to and exercise of political, economic, social, and cultural rights within the increasingly porous territorial grids of nations, has nowhere yet been achieved.”⁵⁶

Policies invariably contain and encode values and interests. They are partisan and plural; but they are also contested and contestable. At the risk of being glib, let me suggest that historians of any stripe invest in the past because they’re involved in crafting a new future while policy makers invest in the future because they’re involved in reacting to current and recent crises. Their very interests are different in orientation and in institutional authority. Local differences in authority, especially between non-academic historians and state agents of policy, flow from diverse conditions of inequality. As the example of *radio trottoir* showed, policy-makers are well-advised to take note of local and unofficial attitudes toward how “resources” like forests figure into debates about social futures that take on economic and personal dimensions. These aspects of debates over what to do with a natural resource like a forest are themselves shaped by historical experience and by historical knowledge.⁵⁷ Thus, divides between historical knowledge and policy-making express ideological positions at the same time that they work to maintain them.⁵⁸ Those productions and supervisions invite critique and examination

⁵⁶ Zeleza, *Manufacturing African Studies*, 375.

⁵⁷ Barrie Sharpe, “First the Forest” 26.

⁵⁸ These divides shift according to historical context. In the early 1970s Shell BP produced core samples as part of its oil exploration activities in the Niger Delta Region. Professor M. A. Sowunmi, a member of the Rivers Research Scheme—a project begun in the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan completed in the University of Port Harcourt, and funded by “the government of the Rivers State—analyzed them in order to provide a sense of change over time in climate and vegetation regimes as context for understanding the archaeology of the Niger Delta Region. It is hard to imagine such public cooperation between the academy, the Nigerian state, and private enterprise in today’s setting of intense conflict over oil extraction. See E. J. Alagoa, “Introduction,” in E. J. Alagoa, F. N. Anozie and Nwanna Nzewunwa (eds.) *The Early History of the Niger Delta* (Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 1988), 18; and E. J. Alagoa, “History and Policy in the Niger Delta Crisis,” Paper presented to the Workshop on Historical Knowledge, Policy Making, and African Reconstruction, Program on International Cooperation in Africa, Program of African Studies, Northwestern University, 22 November 2002, *passim*.

rather than mute acceptance. The participants in the workshop will show the way ahead in subverting these divides.

Environments and their histories are products of natural processes that have, on occasion, raised questions about various policies directed at “controlling” or “managing” them. But, they also embody social forms and social relationships. Environments thus work as both the medium and the stage on which the unexpected fortunes of politics and the project Africa’s reconstructed future will unfold. It will therefore be extremely important to have thick ethnographic and historical knowledge about how different individuals and groups in Africa have built taxonomies of environments and connected them to notions of “development”, “civilization”, and “community”. Mbembe asks for a careful understanding of the “imaginaries and autochthonous practices of space—which are themselves extremely varied—and the modalities through which a territory becomes the object of an appropriation or of the exercise of a power or a jurisdiction.”⁵⁹ Wondering about the social construction of the obvious—in the past and in the present—is the first step toward a Radical Reconstruction of Africa’s future.

Policy-makers look to social science “for a better understanding of the human dimension of a given problem, or its social context or the manner in which cultural constraints make amelioration difficult” and I would insist on the centrality of historical knowledge in meeting such desires.⁶⁰ It not only informs and intervenes in policy, but the very notion of Africa’s reconstruction is an explicitly historical and political one. Moreover, historical knowledge subverts any notion of a nested character for conceiving of the local-global continuum. By insisting on multiple sources of social change—subjective, ethnic, gendered, national, class, and so on—with multiple time depths—a stage in a life cycle, a life, generations and their

⁵⁹ Mbembe, “At the Edge of the World,” 26.

⁶⁰ Prewitt, “The Social Science Project,” 55.

entanglements, long and short centuries, long and short millennia, and so on—and with multiple spatial scales—a grave, a village, a hill, the Sahel, cross-border networks, Sub-Saharan Africa, the African Diaspora—academic historical knowledge works on knots of causality, bundles of meaning, shifting registers of power.

Beyond these observations lies the difficult terrain on which unsustainable growth objectives meet with the limits to destruction of the conditions of life that make an ecology and a bioregion “work”. The different powers and regimes of truth that authorize and advance—or restrict and downplay—the relevance of historical knowledge must be confronted with the hard facts of long-term ecological disequilibria and short-term radical shift which compose and constrain current objectives in health and development. One very obvious example lies in the realm of commodity dependency, where African nations must invest in primary resource extraction, among other things, in order to service debt and create income, even though this form of extraction often degrades local environments and puts their inhabitants at risk.⁶¹ Well-established themes in African history would locate some of the roots of this in the end of slavery in Africa, the dawn of Imperial trade relations, formal colonial rule and the neocolonial relationships between state and private capital. However, other, popular modes of historical knowledge, with rather shallower time depths and rather broader spatial terms of reference, must be brought into both policy-making and academic senses of possible pasts.

Part of an academic historian’s social contract must include her commitment to intervening in policy and practice. Workshop participants will show us how poverty assessment, a healthy civil service, local and global dimensions to resource extraction, and rethinking the meaning of boundaries cannot ignore the nuance and complexity of the past. Their work pushes

⁶¹ M. B. K. Darkoh, “Trade, Environment and Sustainable Development,” **Journal of Eastern African Research and Development** 26 (1996), 127-35, 137-39.

against leaving Africa with narrow economies and precarious ecologies. Blindness to environmental pasts breeds mounting clashes between moneyed interests and the dislocated, muted, and creative “local” communities whose aspirations are anything but solely local. We must work against that.

Appendix I. Announcement of PICA Institute and Call for Fellows (Fall, 2001).

HISTORY MAKING, POLICY MAKING, AND AFRICA'S RECONSTRUCTION.

This Fall the Program of International Cooperation in Africa and PAS will convene an Institute to explore the rich potential of and stubborn limits to building working relationships between historians and policy-makers. Three Africa-based junior scholars will be in residence at PAS and Northwestern for the entirety of the Fall quarter. Six Africa-based senior scholars will join them for 10 days in November, during which we shall convene a Conference on "Historical Knowledge, Policy Making, and Africa's Reconstruction." The Institute participants and preceptor, together with African studies faculty and students at Northwestern will investigate the relationship between historical knowledge and the enterprise of policy making in Africa today. We will explore how the two endeavors might critically engage with each other in the interests of Africa's reconstruction. The activities of both the Institute and the Conference are made possible in part by the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Policy-makers, and others, often complain that scholarly knowledge about Africa is irrelevant to the economic, social, security, and cultural problems that Africans face daily. Scholars, for their part, have also complained that policies designed to combat these problems are too often devoid of historical consciousness and sensibility. The fall 2002 PICA institute will address these complaints by examining questions of governance in environmental and health affairs in Africa past and present. We shall seek to locate the intellectual and pragmatic areas of overlap that academics and policy makers may constructively share.

Our deliberations will be guided by several large questions. What should happen when the practice and product of writing and debating African histories are brought into dialogue with the practice of crafting policies in Africa that aim to reconstruct economies, societies, and cultures? How do similarities and differences between the two modes of work and discourse affect their mutual influence? What does the discontinuous, fragmented nature of political forces mean to each mode? If historians are concerned to present balanced and careful analyses of their material and policy makers strive to condense and flatten ambiguity and contradiction in the service of action, then do the two sorts of work share anything at all in common? Perhaps they share an uneven and biased body of source materials, whose conditions of production reflect the contingent and uncertain realities of life. If histories may be useful by taking into account the dynamics of policy and politics, then policies may be more useful if they take into account the untidy contradictions revealed by the best historical thinking. We should very much like to propose criteria for research excellence that might bridge these gaps and inequalities.

The institute will focus on historical knowledge and policy making for several reasons. While it might seem fraught to ask these historians and policy-makers to talk to each other, the presence/absence or use/abuse of history and policy each in the practice of the other has undergone radical change since the late colonial period, when both sorts of work had their formal births in Africa. Historians and policy makers have perhaps avoided each other more utterly than any other pairing of state and academy on the continent. But the question of the utility of historical knowledge is firmly rooted in how critique of contemporary conditions promotes their

amelioration.

We shall focus our deliberations on the themes of environment and health. African history has had much to say about the relationships between health, economic change, and environmental control. From the social history of disease, to the history of tourism, the intersection of these three themes has helped historians write compelling narratives of the last several centuries. Policy-makers working on stimulating economic development, building institutional capacity, and meeting the challenges of crises in African public health have devised innovative solutions to fuel-shortages and radical destruction of forests, the modification of sexual behavior, and the tense relationships between tourists, wild and domestic animals, and local African populations.

We should like to explore how these promising initiatives and careful historical narratives might be brought into a sustained and mutually critical dialogue. For example, what might happen if we combined critiques of recent and current policy on a particular aspect of health (like malaria or Sexually Transmitted Diseases) with a penetrating historical analysis and narrative that points the way ahead in revising the practice of policy making. What happens when we advance the notion of food security as a health policy issue? Useable pasts and workable policy should have a better relationship than they do.

Appendix II. List of Institute Participants.

Preceptor

Dr. David Schoenbrun, Associate Professor of History, Northwestern University

Visiting Scholars [Affiliation and Title current at time of Institute]

Ms. Beatrix Allah-Mensah, BA, Political Science, University of Ghana-Legon

Dr. Egbieri Joe Alagoa, Professor of History, University of Port Harcourt

Dr. Anthony. I. Asiwaju, Professor of History, University of Lagos

Dr. Fredrick Kaijage, Professor of History, University of Dar es Salaam

Dr. Leo Otoide, Chair and Professor of History, University of Benin

Mr. Richard Ssewakiryanga, MA, Program Officer (Technical), Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Program, Ministry of Finance

Discussants, Panel Chairs, Rapporteur

Dr. LaRay Denzer, Program of African Studies, Northwestern University

Dr. Suleymane Bachir Diagne, Professor of Philosophy, Northwestern University

Dr. Holly Hanson, Assistant Professor of History, Mount Holyoke College

Ms. Nana Akua Anyidoho, Ph.D. Candidate, School of Education and Social Policy,
Northwestern University

Organizational and Support Staff

Dr. LaRay Denzer, Program of African Studies, Northwestern University

Ms. Carmelita Rocha, Business Administrator, of African Studies, Northwestern University

Dr. Rebecca Shereikis, Coordinator, ISITA, Program of African Studies, Northwestern
University

Dr. Akbar Virmani, Associate Director, Program of African Studies, Northwestern University

Appendix III. Workshop Program.

Program on International Cooperation in Africa (PICA)
 Program of African Studies (PAS)
 Evanston Campus, Northwestern University

Workshop

HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE, POLICY-MAKING, AND AFRICA'S RECONSTRUCTION

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 2002

4-5.30 p.m. Keynote address

- *African Pasts and African Futures in a Time of Radical Environmental Change: Notes on History and Policy in Africa's Reconstruction*
 David Schoenbrun, PICA preceptor and acting director, PAS

5.30 p.m. Reception

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2002

9.30–11.30 a.m. *Session 1: Resources, Service, and the State in Historical Perspective*

- *Historicizing Environmental Policy Making for Good Governance in Ghana: The Case of the Mining Sub-sector, 1981–2001*
 Beatrix Allah-Mensah, political science, University of Ghana, and PICA junior fellow
 - *Tanzania's Public Service Pay Reform in Historical Perspective*
 Fred Kaijage, history, University of Dar es Salaam and PICA senior fellow
 - *Poverty Knowledge and the Power of Poverty Policies: A Historiography of Poverty Eradication Policy Processes in Uganda*
 Richard Ssewakiryanga, Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Project and PICA junior fellow
- Discussant: Holly E. Hanson, history and African and African-American Studies, Mount Holyoke College

11.30–1.30 p.m. LUNCH BREAK

1.30–5 p.m. *Session 2: Nigerian Intersections: Borders, Regions, and Zones*

- *History and Policy in the Niger Delta Crisis*
 Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa, emeritus professor of history, University of Port Harcourt and PICA senior fellow
- *Boundary, History, and Policy in the Bakassi Peninsula: The Problem of Traditionalism and Modernity*
 Leo Otoide, history, University of Benin and PICA junior fellow
- *Comparative Borderlands Studies and Policy Making in Africa: A Nigerian Historian's Lived Research Career Experience*
 Anthony I. Asiwaju, history and director, Centre for African Regional and Border Studies (CARIBS), University of Lagos; and PICA senior fellow

Discussant: Souleymane Bachir Diagne, philosophy, Northwestern University

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