

And the Twain Shall Meet: Connecting Africa and the Middle East (POMEPS Studies 40 – Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides – June 2020)

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In December 2018, a popular uprising erupted in Sudan with tens of thousands pouring onto the streets demanding change. For months, the largely youth-led Sudanese protest movement sustained a focused, nonviolent mobilization against the repressive regime of President Omar al-Bashir. Against the odds, protestors succeeded in forcing Bashir from power in June 2019, beginning a tortuous negotiated transition towards an uncertain future. Pressure from Middle Eastern states like the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt in support of the military, as the African Union tried to broker a transition to civilian rule, sparked a debate within Sudan on the costs of belonging to an Arab alliance system, on the merits of the decades-old Arab-Muslim national project, and on the need for a more inclusive national identity and historical narrative. Sudan's uprising interacted creatively with Algeria's contemporaneous *Hirak* movement, and sparked conversation in other North African states about who is Arab, who is African, and the benefits of being part of the African Union versus the Arab League.

Those debates were remarkably opaque to the field of Middle East Studies. Despite Sudan's long tenure in the Arab League, its formidable Islamist movement, and involvement in many long running regional political issues, MENA specialists largely ignored Sudan until the eruption of its revolution. The country is rarely included in the grand narratives of Middle East politics: barely mentioned in accounts of the 2011 Arab uprisings, left out of most studies of political Islam, and ignored in studies of Arab authoritarianism and attempted democratization. Nor did African Studies do much better with Sudan, partly due to its Arab dominated north and membership in the Arab League. This dual neglect led to the creation of a distinct Sudan Studies Association in 1981 to bring scholarly attention to the country, which prior to the country's partition was the largest in both regions.^[1]

Sudan is not unique. Middle Eastern Studies and African Studies have difficulty dealing with a whole set of states that are part of both African and Middle Eastern political ambit. The Red Sea creates an arbitrary divide between the Horn of Africa and the coastal states of the Arabian Peninsula. Northern African states are metaphorically removed from a continent defined as "sub-Saharan" despite the permeability of the Sahara Desert. Sudan's revolution offers a good moment to reflect on its liminal status between the Middle East and Africa and the costs of academia's ossified, artificially-bounded regional studies. What is the real methodological basis for and analytical value of inherited categories such as "sub-Saharan Africa", "North Africa", and "the Middle East"? What are the foundations of the intellectual tradition that treats regions that exist within overlapping space and share deep historic ties as ontologically separate and

distinct? What has been lost analytically and politically in adhering to these intellectual silos? How can we move towards an approach that foregrounds these transregional connections across time and space?

In this framing essay for the collection, we trace the origins of the Africa-Middle East separation – the view of the Red Sea and the Sahara as racial and civilizational boundaries – to European Enlightenment thought and early colonial expansionism. We also show how postcolonial authoritarian regimes, Cold War rivalries, and nationalist currents in Africa, the Middle East and the United States would reinforce these divides. Finally, we lay out the intellectual and analytical costs of this divide, and point the way towards an urgently needed transregional alternative approach.

Geographies of Race

The late Kenyan political scientist Ali Mazrui, who wrote extensively about relations between Africa and the Middle East, coined the neologism “Afrabia.”^[2] Madagascar, which is separated from the African continent by the 500-mile wide Mozambique Channel, is considered part of Africa, and yet Yemen – which is only “a stone’s throw,” and linguistically and culturally tied to the Horn of Africa — is not. Mazrui’s observation informs our understanding of the artificiality of the conceptual divide between “Africa” and “the Middle East.” European decision makers turned the Red Sea and the Sahara into artificial divides. Today, these categories are being reimagined as myriad states, and non-state actors treat the Sahara and the Red Sea as connectors instead of barriers. Scholarship should reflect these realities.

Imagined divisions between regions have evolved over time. The purportedly Berber word *Ifriqiyya*, from where we get the name “Africa,” once referred to the Tunisian coast and Northwest Africa, but now generally signifies Africa below the Sahara. The migration of the name reflects historic struggles within Africa itself over how to not only define a specific geographic space but also how to assess the appropriate boundaries of various cultural, political and economic phenomena. Where the lines are drawn has important political, social and cultural implications, defining not only boundaries of citizenship and inclusion but also patterns of racial exclusion and domination.

The European view of the Sahara as a line dividing Africa is often traced to Hegel, who famously declared that “Africa...is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit.” The German philosopher divided Africa into three regions: North Africa, which he called “European Africa;” northeast Africa, which he termed “the land of the Nile;” and then “Africa proper,” the land to the south and the west. He considered North Africa and the Nile Valley to be extensions of Europe and Asia respectively. Of “Africa Proper,” the land to the south and west, which provided slaves for the transatlantic trade, Hegel opined: “Africa proper, as far as history goes back, has remained for all purposes of connection with the rest of the world – shut up...” He concluded: “In the interior of Africa proper... the mind of the

African remains shut up within itself, feels no urge to be free and endures without resistance universal slavery.”[3] Hegel’s division of the world into “people with history” and those without, his segmenting of Africa, and separating the northern tier from the rest the continent would shape colonial policies, academic disciplines and generations of scholarship.[4]

Even African scholars reproduced Hegel’s designations. In *The Invention of Africa* (1988), the seminal intellectual history of African philosophy, the Congolese thinker Valentin Mudimbe argued that knowledge production in Africa was dependent on Western languages and on the “colonial library,” which provided conceptual frames for post-colonial African thought. Yet as the Senegalese scholar Ousmane Kane observes, Mudimbe could only reach this conclusion by ignoring northern Africa and the “Islamic library” – the multitude of texts written in Arabic and ‘*ajami* across the Sahel and the Sahara, from the 16th century onward.[5]

As the progenitor of racial science, Immanuel Kant had taken these divisions even further in the 18th century.[6] The German philosopher developed a formalized racial hierarchy underscoring the importance of skin color as evidence of superiority and inferiority. He divided humanity into four categories: ‘1/ the white race; 2/ the Negro race; 3/ the Hun race (Mongol or Kalmuck); and 4/ the Hindu or Hindustani race.’ Arabs, Moors, Persian, and Turkish-Tatars are included as sub-categories of the white race. Kant’s elaborate hierarchy of race reflected ambivalence about Arabs and Muslims. While denigrating the Oriental races, white and non-white, he wrote positively about Islam and the Arabs, whom he considered white.[7]

This ambivalence about North Africa would ripple across the centuries. Kant and Hegel were equivocal about the racial status of North Africans (alternatively called Moors, Arabs, Berbers), but they did see them as different from the people below the Sahara. European racial scholars could never agree on the specific criteria for defining race let alone the correct order of the hierarchy. Whether emphasizing “skin color, facial features, national origin, language, culture, ancestry” or public sentiment and political opinions, the exact racial position of North Africans was always contested. It was generally agreed that they sat below the European and above the Black African.[8]

These racial distinctions would then inform colonial patterns of rule. Segregating races according to their presumed racial-civilizational capacity became the logic of 19th century colonial governance. In North Africa, deep into the 1930s, French colonial administrators wrote tomes claiming that Arabs and Berbers were distinct races, with the latter deemed white, indigenous, and secular, thus more amenable to the French *mission civilisatrice* than the Oriental Arab settlers.[9] Sudan would become a flash point for colonial administrators, as a territory straddling both North and Central Africa, with a long history of ethnic mixing. The British began to separate populations into categories of “Oriental Arabs” and “native Africans” and developed a policy of native administration in which North and South were governed according to different logics ostensibly reflecting the natural abilities of the two regions. This culminated in 1930, when the British adopted the “Southern Policy” that sought to regulate movement and interaction

between the country's "African" south and "Arab" north to protect the South from the nefarious economic and political intentions of their northern countrymen.^[10]

The colonial conceptual separation of the North African (Moorish, Berber, or Arab) from the sub-Saharan (Negro), would make its way across the Atlantic. On the American plantation for instance, whether a Muslim slave was of North African or Sahelian origin and Arabic speaking, or from "Black Africa" and not Muslim, determined their place in the plantation's pecking order. As historian Michael Gomez has argued, the role of Muslim slaves and Islam in colonial and antebellum America "in the process of social stratification within the larger African American society... contributed significantly to the development of African American identity."^[11] An estimated ten percent of the slaves brought to America were Muslim, many of whom were of Fulbe, Mande and Senegambian background, whose features, according to the colonial Hamitic thesis, were thought to be closer to those of Europeans than of Africans. American slave owners saw Muslim slaves, "as more intelligent, more reasonable, more physically attractive, more dignified people."^[12] Because of this thinking, Muslims slaves in the United States were often placed in positions of power over other non-Muslim slaves, earning the distrust of other Africans and reinforcing the social construction of their difference.^[13]

Slavery and colonial policies thus reinforced the Sahara as a racial marker and geographic divider. In the United States, the segmenting of Africa and "whiteness" of Arabs would be reinforced as Christian Arab immigrants from the Levant began trickling into the US, and lobbied for white status, emphasizing their cultural and geographic proximity to Europe and distancing themselves from Americans with African or Asian origins. The early Syrian migrants were so successful in demonstrating their whiteness that Arabs (and Iranians) would be unaffected by the Immigration Act of 1917, also known as the Asiatic Barred Zone Act, whereby Congress designated a geographical area demarcating the boundaries of western Asia and specifying areas from which the U.S. would accept immigrants. Fragments of the modern-day Arab world were included in the "barred zone"—such as slivers of modern-day Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Yemen—but North Africa and the Levant, the vast part of the Arabic-speaking world, along with Iran, were left out.^[14] Since then, the American Census Bureau has considered people from the Middle East and North Africa as white.

Race Against Empire

How have these legacies shaped the academic study of "Africa" and "the Middle East"? Scholars in the West continue to adhere to these divisions but almost never probe their origins nor question their intellectual merit. More commonly, scholars point to differing levels of economic development; religious and linguistic variation; perceived differences in political regimes; competing pan-Arab and pan-African political projects; divergent political views vis a vis issues such as Israel/Palestine as the primary distinction.^[15] The distinctions are taken as obvious, or accepted in the name of pragmatism or tradition.

Yet, each of these proclaimed logics of division have proven problematic. The refusal to name race as the core logic of division is puzzling, if unsurprising. As recently as 1962 the anthropologist, Carleton Coon, a former President of the American Association of Physical Anthropology who taught at Harvard and Penn, released his book, *The Origin of Races*. Coon was not only a proponent of racial hierarchy and racial science, but particularly invested in the divide between “Berbers” and “Negroes.” He had made his name as an ethnographer of the Amazigh population of northern Morocco, collecting hundreds of blood samples and body measurements, and concluding in *Tribes of the Rif* (1931) that the Riffian Berbers were “white men” of Nordic descent more capable than other degraded Mediterranean’s or Negroes.[16] The popular and legal sorting of Africa’s diverse populations to fit America’s racial hierarchy continue to shape academic knowledge production.

A glance at how these varying dynamics have shaped the study of Africa and the Middle East historically, especially within the social sciences, can help illuminate the racial origins of the enduring divide.

African Studies has its genesis within the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) set up to educate formerly enslaved Americans in a still racially divided country. [17] Heavily influenced by Pan-Africanism, scholars at HBCUs such as the historians Leo Hansberry and Merz Tate (Howard University), the political scientist Ralph Bunche (Howard University), and the sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois (Atlanta University), first began to study African cultures in the 1920s. At the time, due to the widespread racial prejudice against Black scholars and the general assumption that Africa was of little interest intellectually, their works were given little attention in the broader academy. As Robert Vitalis has shown, Black political scientists of the “Howard School of International Relations” would link the condition of African Americans with that of the non-white population in the colonized world, offering a critique of the early American international relations as well as of Enlightenment thought. [18] For example, in *Africa in the World* (1947), Du Bois directly confronts Hegel’s partitioning of Africa and the argument that Africa had no history. While recent work has explored how American international relations “racialized” Black people, less has been done with how North African and Middle Eastern populations were categorized by early American political science.[19]

In the same decade, Syrian scholars (like Philip K Hitti) began establishing scholarly centers for the study of Arabic and the Middle East in American universities and colleges. [20] These departments and programs focused on languages, and often connected smoothly to Christian interest in the Holy Land. Many Middle Eastern scholars were anti-colonial nationalists like their Africanist counterparts. Their emerging academic projects were on parallel tracks, only to be eclipsed by much bigger “area studies” projects with the Cold War.

The dominant focus of African Studies on Africa south of the Sahara began to take form after Melville Herskovitz, a white scholar who began his career at Howard, moved to Northwestern University in 1927. Unlike the Pan-Africanists who included all of continental Africa as well as

the Diaspora within their purview,^[21] the emerging field of African Studies embraced the colonial practice of partitioning so called “Black Africa” from the rest of the continent based on supposed civilizational differences. Herskovitz would later help found the African Studies Association and served as the first President. Support and direction from the Social Science Research Council, private foundations such as Ford and Carnegie, and the U.S. government over the following decades pushed African Studies to abandon the continental approach in favor of one that focused solely on Africa south of the Sahara.

The Cold War brought new resources to the area studies field in the name of national interest. Both Middle Eastern and African Studies grew as the U.S. government sought to counter the Soviet Union by supporting the development of area studies through the Title VI program of the National Defense Education Act on 1958. Reauthorized in 1965 with the passage of the Higher Education Act, the Title VI program provided funding for language and culture training. This funding flowed primarily to predominantly white research universities while HBCUs were left bereft, weakening the reach of their continental and diasporic approach. As Pearl Robinson notes, this division was not limited to an intellectual debate around what should be included in the study of Africa, but eventually came to produce two different paradigms altogether, one based at HBCUs that embraced a continental approach while the other, based at predominantly white institutions, excluded the North from its ambit: “Each of these worlds has its own complex sociology of intellectual pace-setters, respected elders, epistemological debates, citation conventions, overlapping memberships, and identity politics configured around a mix of symbolic and substantive association with the production and validation of knowledge about Africa.”^[22]

Middle East Studies was not shaped by diaspora or immigrant politics to the same degree as African Studies had been. Instead, as Timothy Mitchell notes, many leading American universities relied on European scholars, more versed in colonial discourses and practice than in American racial politics, to orient the field and to provide it with intellectual heft.^[23] European emigré scholars like Bernard Lewis, Annemarie Schimmel, and H. A. R. Gibb would help set up centers for the study of Islam and the Middle East at Princeton and Harvard. This would lead to some fascinating intersections between intellectual traditions and Cold War policy. For instance, some of these scholars advanced the old colonial argument that Sufi Islam – present in parts of Africa – was more moderate and flexible, and more compatible with liberalism, than the versions of Islam prevalent in the Middle East.^[24]

By the 1960s, these distinct worlds of African Studies and Middle East Studies had concretized, though not without controversy. In 1969, Black Power activists disrupted the annual meeting of the African Studies Association in Montreal due to the exclusion of Egypt from its ambit. Both Egypt and Algeria had been central to the Non-Aligned Movement and the broader tradition of Third Worldism, offering a clear ground for rejecting Western-dictated divisions. Of equal concern, though typically shunted to the background, was the specific racial logic that

underpinned the position of Africa within the area studies approach. As Robinson explains, “The Cold War rationale for area studies—with its geopolitical criteria for establishing priorities—gave us a world of regional hierarchies calibrated by relative power, levels of culture, and ideological cleavages. From the perspective of the area studies establishment, Africa’s place at the bottom of those hierarchies was never in question.”[\[25\]](#)

Middle East Studies in the United States was shaped more profoundly by its intersections with the demands of Western foreign policy agendas which defined the region as a core national security interest. Oil, competition with the Soviet Union, and support for the state of Israel dominated Washington’s approach to the Middle East. During the Cold War, this dynamic shaped the relationship between the academic field, funders, and the policy apparatus. This only increased as the Middle East became ever more central to American national security concerns as Washington’s role in the region escalated through multiple Arab-Israeli wars, the OPEC oil embargo, the Iranian revolution, multiple wars with Iraq, and 9/11.

Decolonizing Area Studies

Decolonization and Cold War politics influenced the trajectories of both Middle Eastern and African Studies. Key “Middle Eastern” actors on the African continent, such as Nasser’s Egypt, Muammar al Qaddafi’s Libya, and the Front de Libération Nationale’s (FLN) Algeria, viewed themselves within an African context, as did many Third Worldist intellectuals and publics. Upon coming to power, for instance, Gamal Abdel Nasser would famously declare that Egypt falls within “three circles” – Arab, African and Islamic. In 1953, he wrote: “If we consider...the continent of Africa—I may say without exaggeration that we cannot, under any circumstance, however much we might desire it, remain aloof from the terrible and sanguinary conflict going on there today between five million whites and 200 million Africans. We cannot do so for an important and obvious reason: we are in Africa.” The Egyptian president aligned Cairo with the Soviet Union through his two decades of rule, and supported liberation movements from Algeria to Rhodesia to the Zanzibari revolution, where Africans rose up against Afro-Arab ruling class. Most newly independent African states, led by Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia had a vision of pan-Africanism that included North Africa. And from 1963, when the Organization of African Unity was founded, until 1967, Egypt was the largest contributor to the OAU Liberation Fund.[\[26\]](#)

To be sure, Nasser’s policies faced some opposition within the continent. The Egyptian leader, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana and Sekou Touré of Guinea belonged to the more radical Casablanca school which called for African unity, a pan-African army, and supported the FLN against France. Opposed to them were the more conservative Monrovia school – which included Nigeria, Senegal and Cameroon – that stressed African statehood over pan-nationalism, and backed France in Algeria. Kamuzu Banda of Malawi was wary of Nasser’s interventionism, and wanted a “sub-Saharan pan-Africanism.” Israel also competed with Egypt for the favors of African leaders. Nkrumah, an ally and competitor – was advised by the Trinidadian ex-

Communist intellectual, George Padmore, who was sympathetic to Zionism and favored forging ties with Israel to check Egyptian ambitions; he invited Golda Meir to address the All African People Conference in Accra in 1958.

Egypt's Nasser also proclaimed solidarity with the Black Freedom Struggle proclaiming solidarity with African Americans suffering in the "pure white democracy" of the US and offering scholarships to Black students in the South.^[27] The Nasserist regime cultivated warm ties with a range of Black groups including the Nation of Islam and Black leaders including Malcolm X and Du Bois. When the latter was barred from foreign travel, Nasser invited the eighty-two-year-old scholar and his wife Shirley Graham to settle in Cairo, offering them a home on the Nile. Algiers, too, became a hub of revolutionary global activism which included a number of prominent African American leaders from the Black Panthers including Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver.

African American intellectuals also disagreed on whether North Africa was part of Africa. Some in the Black nationalist camp were wary of Arab civilization, and of how North Africans in America had honorary white status. Booker T. Washington, in his autobiography *Up From Slavery* (1901), scoffs at how a "dark-skinned man...a citizen of Morocco" is allowed into a "local hotel" from which he, "an American Negro," is banned. There was strong sympathy among some African American leaders for the Zionist cause and Israel, from nationalists like Marcus Garvey, liberals like Bayard Rustin, and to radicals like the younger Du Bois (prior to the Suez War). Martin Luther King was similarly sympathetic to Zionism, but would develop a more nuanced view after visiting Jerusalem in 1959 and meeting with Palestinian leaders. King was aware of how American racial politics intersected with the Israel-Palestine conflict. He needed Jewish political support, but saw how critical the growing Black Power movement was of Israeli policy. King planned a large pilgrimage of American Christians to Israel and the West Bank in 1967 that would culminate in a sermon on the Mount of Olives in East Jerusalem. These plans were scuppered after hostilities broke out in 1967. King did not want to be portrayed as endorsing Israel's conquest, nor seen as a dove on Vietnam, but a hawk in the Middle East.^[28] At any rate, as long as Egypt supported the African American struggle (and independent Algeria hosted the Black Panthers), the pro-Arab Pan-African vision was ascendant in African American Studies.^[29] Shirley Du Bois would write a biography of Nasser and pen a widely-circulated manifesto titled "Egypt is Africa."^[30] Stokely Carmichael would echo that statement, adding that Palestine was the "tip of Africa."^[31]

In the US, domestically, this Pan-Africanist perspective faced sharp opposition from two quarters: from neo-conservative scholars, who disliked Black Power's talk of Afro-Arab solidarity against the West and Israel, and from Afrocentrists, who saw Arab civilization as just as racist and as anti-Black as the West. In 1971, Bernard Lewis would publish *Race and Color in Islam*, an influential polemic on racism in Islam, that directly responded to Malcolm X's talk of Islamic colorblindness, saying that although "Malcolm X was an acute and sensitive

observer...the [Islamic] beliefs which he had acquired...prevented him from realizing the full implication of 'the color pattern' he saw" in the Arab world. Rather than an "interracial utopia," Lewis argued, a quick reading of *The Arabian Nights* showed the "Alabama-like quality" and "Southern impression" of Arab life.

The valences of these political definitions began to change as key Arab states shifted away from the Soviet Union in the early 1970s. In 1972, the Black Panthers were expelled from Algeria by the then Foreign Minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika, as Algeria moved to normalize ties with the US. With Anwar Sadat's arrival to power, and his subsequent crackdown on the left and move towards peace with Israel and an alliance with the United States, Cairo would turn its back on Africa. Riyadh, Cairo's new patron, began funding myriad anti-socialist movements on the continent from Eritrea to Angola. Sadat, ironically Egypt's first and only Nubian head of state, would tell journalist Barbara Walters that he never liked the way the Soviets treated Egypt, like it was some "central African country."^[32]

The African American left stopped receiving support, moral or political from the Arab states. African American expat intellectuals such as Shirley Du Bois, David Du Bois, and Julian Mayfield left Egypt. The North African regimes' crackdown on non-Arab minorities and languages, and suppressing all discussions of racism would further alienate African American opinion. By the 1970s, when scholars in the field now called Black Studies alluded to Africa, it was to "Black Africa." If North Africa came up, it was generally depicted negatively as a land of invaders, an occupied territory. In 1971, Chancellor Williams published *The Destruction of African Civilization*, which would emerge as one of the founding texts of the Afrocentrist movement. Williams described how since the time of pharaonic Egypt, Arabs had attempted to conquer Africa while Nubians and Ethiopians heroically resisted the white "Arab-Asian" effort to destroy the single black kingdom which originally extended from the shores of the Mediterranean to the source of the Nile. By the 1980s, in Afrocentric circles, the Sahara had become a divider again, the color line running like a belt across the continent's girth. Temple University scholar Molefi Asante's popular book *Afrocentrism* (1985) captured the zeitgeist. "The Arabs, with their jihads, or holy wars, were thorough in their destruction of much of the ancient [Egyptian] culture," he wrote, but fleeing Egyptian priests dispersed across the continent spreading Egyptian knowledge.

Starting in the early 1960s, the Pan-African academic project would find a home in African universities, specifically at Makerere University in Uganda and the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania (and to a lesser degree, the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Committee in Zamalek, Cairo). The differences between the Makerere School and the Dar School were personified by the sharp debates between Kenyan political scientist Ali Mazrui and Guyanese economic historian Walter Rodney, published in *Transition* magazine. They differed on the role of the national university, the African intellectual, and epistemological frameworks, but both embraced all of Africa within their intellectual agenda.^[33] The University of Dar es Salaam would become

an incubator for one of the most important early trans-regional approaches—world systems theory. Marxist theorists Samir Amin, Immanuel Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi would all spend time in the Tanzanian capital during the peak of the Dar school in the 1960s and 1970s. Rodney would purposely try to shift the unit of analysis from nation-states, highlighting instead the inter-connected global system. World systems theory emerged in light of these discussions, as Wallerstein in his work shifted the focus from state actors to the larger world system.^[34] Both Wallerstein and Mazrui would take this trans-regional approach to SUNY-Binghamton where they eventually took up positions.

With Egypt's shift into America's orbit and the rise of Sadat, Egyptian Pan-Africanist Marxists like Samir Amin looked to Dakar where working with the Malawian scholar, Thandika Mkandawire and others, he helped establish the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in 1973. Amin worked closely with historian Hilmi Sharaway (who was Nasser's point person for African liberation movements in the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) to translate key works into Arabic and to engage Arab scholars. During the Cold War, CODESRIA struggled to gain reach outside of Africa, in part due to Western prejudice against what was perceived as politically biased scholarship.

The divide between North Africa and Africa was institutionalized even more fully as international institutions adopted and made policy based upon the category of “sub-Saharan Africa” (in lieu of the earlier “Tropical Africa” and “Black Africa”). Despite critiques from African scholars,^[35] it would form the basis of the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund's approach to the continent. The United Nations still considers 46 of Africa's 54 countries as sub-Saharan – excluding Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia.^[36] For some reason, Eritrea is considered sub-Saharan but neighboring Djibouti is not. Language, race and ethnicity, geographic features, as well as level of economic development have all been put forth as reasons for how a country is classified, yet these rarely match the actual sorting of countries. For the World Bank, Mauritania, which is located largely in the Sahara, is classified as “sub-Saharan.” Somalia and Djibouti located in the Horn of Africa are categorized as Middle East. It's worth recalling that the World Bank once placed apartheid South Africa in the MENA category, but once the country transitioned to Black majority rule, it was put in the “sub-Saharan” box.^[37] African organizations—such as the OAU and the African Development Bank—have since the 1960s tried to push back against such externally-imposed designations, preferring to speak instead of regional organizations like the East African Community and the Economic Community of West African States as its “building blocks.”

In political science, both international relations and comparative politics have long treated North Africa as separate and distinct from “sub-Saharan Africa.” Realism sidelined Africa in general, with their focus on the international system's leading states – states “that make a difference,” in Kenneth Waltz's memorable words.^[38] IR scholars felt comfortable analyzing the alliances and

balance of power maneuverings of Egypt and the Arab states, in part because they were seen as central to the American national interest but also because, unlike sub-Saharan states, they were seen as strong states with the capacity to project power across state borders.[39] African states, by contrast, were viewed through the lens of state weakness, permeability, and regime security. Jackson and Rosburg's influential study "Why Africa's Weak States Persist," for example, began from the premise that Black Africa's states were shell-states which lacked empirical statehood. North African states, by contrast, were assumed to be more "real," with higher capacity than sub-Saharan states. Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (1996) assumes that the Sahara is a civilizational fault line, a bloody border separating a North African Islam from a sub-Saharan African civilization—a distinction only possible if one erases sub-Saharan Islam.

Both African Studies and Middle East Studies would experience uprisings in the 1970s and 1980s, but in different directions. The publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 marked a significant rupture within Middle East Studies and area studies generally. Said was not the first to critique the intellectual orientation of the field—among others, the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) had been founded by critical scholars in 1971. But Said's intervention raised questions about the epistemic assumptions of Middle East studies in ways that continue to roil the field today.[40] A similar insurrection took place in African Studies, in that case, against foreign policy and intelligence interests shaping the research agenda. While these (ongoing) critiques did much to upend the epistemological and ontological assumptions behind area studies, they did not challenge the political-racial logic of dividing North Africa (the Maghreb) from Africa itself. The reformists in Middle East Studies were not clamoring to integrate Africa in their research agenda; and in African Studies to this day when North Africa is discussed, it is mostly in the context of slavery, racism and diaspora communities.

With the end of the Cold War, leading African scholars with ties to CODESRIA such as Mahmood Mamdani and Achille Mbembe (both former presidents) took up positions in prominent Western universities. In an influential article published in 2000, Mbembe argued for a cosmopolitan (Afropolitan) approach to the African experience, starting with a reconfiguring of the geographies that continue to define the study of the continent.[41] Mbembe argues that the rise of globalization upends national sovereignty, rendering debates around the strength or weakness of African states moot. Instead, he calls for a recognition of how globalization "proceeds by way of the material deconstruction of existing territorial frameworks, the excision of conventional boundaries, and the simultaneous creation of mobile spaces and spaces of enclosure intended to limit the mobility of populations judged to be superfluous" (284). For Mbembe, such evolutions in sovereignty reflect long-standing practices of territoriality and control that defined Africa and the Middle East prior to the advent of European colonial rule.

In particular, he calls attention to the long history of exchange that ran through multiple ancient corridors connecting North Africa to sub-Saharan Africa despite, or more accurately, because of the Sahara desert. In contrast to colonial-inflected scholarship that assumes the Sahara as a

natural barrier between Africa and the Middle East, Mbembe shows how North African countries like Morocco and Egypt have enduring religious, commercial and political ties to the countries located below the great desert. He also highlighted the role of ethnic diasporas and creole populations—Lebanese merchants in West Africa, religious networks spanning multiple regions, West African migrants in the Maghreb—that confound assumptions of regional isolation.

Demographic shifts and developments in the US after 9/11 have also blurred these domestic and academic borders. North African migration to the US – including from Sudan, Morocco and Algeria has grown exponentially since the introduction of the Green Card lottery in 1995. This in turn changed the composition of the academic field, bringing new identities and interests into the fold. Increased engagement by North African and Middle Eastern Americans in racial politics, joining people of color coalitions, engagement with Africana Studies, lobbying the Census Bureau to stop categorizing MENA communities as white, and increased interest in the history of racism in northern Africa region have all begun to erode these disciplinary and area studies borders. Joint panels were organized when MESA and ASA overlapped in the same city but again mostly on racism and slavery in North Africa.[\[42\]](#)

Since the end of the Cold War, the area studies have gone through multiple crises, affecting African and Middle Eastern Studies differently but with some common themes. The massive U.S. national security investment in the Middle East after 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq created huge incentives for the study of security issues such as terrorism while pushing other traditional themes of the field towards the sidelines. In political science, at least, both fields turned towards professionalism and methodological sophistication. Rising cohorts of well-trained political scientists working in the Middle East and Africa alike increasingly wrote for general disciplinary audiences, prioritizing the methods, questions, and paradigms prevalent in the broader field. While this may on its face seem to downgrade the significance of the ideological battles and racial underpinnings outlined in this essay, in fact those foundational assumptions have permeated academic approaches to the region—with the artificial divide between Africa, North Africa and the Middle East only one of the most readily apparent.

Transregional Studies

Increased mobility of capital, people, goods and ideas should now be pushing scholars away from conceptualizing regions as bounded entities towards a transregional approach that foregrounds their interconnections.[\[43\]](#) New fields such as Global Studies have begun to supplant area studies both in terms of scholarly interest and financial resources. Rather than a replacement for African and Middle East Studies, however, the new emphasis on transregional studies promises a middle path. Such an approach would recognize the value of a regional approach while resisting the siloization that once typified area studies scholarship.

In the last decade, a number of initiatives have emerged on the African continent – in Dakar, Johannesburg, Rabat and Kampala – that are trying to connect African Studies with Middle East

Studies, so as to bridge the Saharan divide. In African universities, social scientists have been doing comparative work across the Saharan divide, and asking questions not asked in North American or European universities. Why are Senegal and Ghana democracies, but not Morocco and Algeria? Why are Rwandan and Ethiopian economies growing at much faster rates than North African states? Few American universities have been involved in these initiatives.

There are signs of change. New York University recently held a conference called “Africa in the Middle East, the Middle East in Africa” and Harvard University organized a two day conference on “Africa and the Maghreb.” Cornell is launching The Africa Hall in Sharjah, which aims to study historic ties – especially migratory and cultural flows – between Africa and the Arab world, while Columbia’s Department of Middle East, Africa and South Asia Studies seeks to push beyond traditional area studies boundaries altogether. But these initiatives are driven by historians, cultural studies scholars and some anthropologists – not social scientists. This POMEPS workshop bringing together scholars of Africa and the Middle East aligns with those efforts to get American political science to begin addressing questions raised by their counterparts in Africa and to break down the barriers between academic subfields defined by regions.

Future workshops will develop the themes raised in this introduction, but will also look at the comparative role of the Arab League and the Africa Union; how de-carbonization will affect Gulf states policies in Africa, and the response of Sahelian states. We will discuss refugee and migration flows between Africa and the Middle East, LGBT and feminist movements; how concepts of “indigenous” and “settler” can be used across the Saharan divide. We will also look at the role of Islamic humanitarianism, the comparative legacy and memory of the Ottoman Empire in these two regions, and the trajectories of the “rentier state” and “failed state” concepts, that were developed to explain the politics of the Middle East and Africa.

[1] After the partition of the country in 2011, the association was renamed the Sudans Study Association.

[2] Ali Mazrui, “Afrabia: Africa and the Arabs in the New World Order,” *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* (1992)

[3] G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) p.173–175

[4] As recently as 1965, Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper would say declare that “Africa was enveloped in darkness – like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America, and darkness is not a subject for history. Adding: “Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa.”

- [5] Ousmane Kane, *Beyond Timbuktu: An Intellectual History of Muslim West Africa* (Harvard University Press 2016) p.18
- [6] See Charles W. Mills, “Kant’s Untermenschen” in *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism*
- [7] Christie Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference* (Routledge 2007) p.75-77
- [8] Lopez, Ian Haney. 2006. *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*. New York: New York University Press.
- [9] Jane Gross and David McMurray, “Berber Origins and the Politics of Ethnicity in Colonial North African Discourse,” *POLAR : Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 16 (2):39-58 1993 ; Charles-Robert Ageron, La France a-t-elle un politique kabyle? *Revue historique*(1960)
- [10] Robert O. Collins, *Shadows in the Grass: Britain in the Southern Sudan, 1918-1956* (1983). Johnson, Douglas. 2012. “British policy in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan bears some responsibility for the deep-rooted divisions between North and South.”
- <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2012/07/02/british-policy-in-anglo-egyptian-sudan-bears-some-responsibility-for-the-deep-rooted-divisions-between-north-and-south/>
- [11] Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press,1998), p.60
- [12] See Newbell N. Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1926), p.528-529
- [13] In his book *Prince Among Slaves*, about the life of another prominent Muslim slave, Ibrahima Abdal Rahman, Terry Alford notes that Muslim slaves were used as “drivers, overseers and confidential servants which their numbers did not justify.” Terry Alford, *Prince Among Slaves* (Oxford University Press 1986)
- [14] Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (University of California Press 2009)
- [15] Bentahar, Ziad. 2011. “Continental Drift: The Disjunction of North and Sub-Saharan Africa.” *Research in African Literatures* 42(1): 1-13.
- [16] Coone would write, “The few Riffians having even a trace of Negroid blood are engaged in ironworking trade, and the men...holding offices...are apt to be of Nordic-Alpine type...and the men noted for bravery but not for political ability, are more apt to be purer Nordic.” See Warwick Anderson, “The Anomalous Blonds of the Maghreb: Carlton Coon Invents African Nordics,” in Martin Thomas and Amanda Harris, eds., *Expeditionary Anthropology: Teamwork, Travel and the “Science of Man”* (Methodology & History in Anthropology Book 33) (Berghahn Books 2018)
- [17] Paul Zeleza, “The Ties That Bind: African, African American, Africana, and Diaspora Studies.” Presented at the Center for African American Studies, Princeton University (2011)
- [18] Vitalis, Robert, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: The Birth of American International Relations* (Cornell 2015)
- [19] Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda and Robbie Shilliam, *Race and Racism in International Relations Confronting the Global Colour Line* (Routledge 2014)

[20] Lockman, Zachary. *Field Notes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United States*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. (2016)

[21] As Abrahamsen correctly notes, “Pan-Africanism” was never homogenous but articulated at least three different positions regarding the correct focus of analysis. Here we are only concerned with how it initially emerged in the U.S. context. See Abrahamsen, Rita. 2019. “Internationalists, sovereigntists, nativists: Contending visions of world order in Pan-Africanism.” *Review of International Studies* 46(1):1-19.

[22] Robinson, Pearl. 2004. “Area Studies in Search of Africa.” In Szanton 2004.

[23] Mitchell, Timothy. 2004. “The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science.” In Szanton, David, ed. 2004. *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

[24] Ian Johnson, *A Mosque in Munich: Nazis, the CIA, and the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), p. 72. Rosemary R. Hicks, “Comparative Religion and the Cold War Transformation of Indo-Persian “Mysticism” into Liberal Islamic Modernity,” in Markus Dressler and Arvind Mandair, *Secularism and Religion-Making* (Oxford University press 2011)

[25] Robinson, Pearl. 2004. “Area Studies in Search of Africa.” In Szanton 2004, p.119

[26] Hamdy Abdalrahman Hassan, *Takumul al-ifriqi fi ifriqiya: sad al-fajwabayna shamal wa janub al-sahra’* (Africa Institute of South Africa 2011) p.64

[27] Richard H. Nolte, “Pure White Democracy: Egyptian Reactions to the Affair of Autherine Lucy,” American Universities Field Staff Reports, *Northeast Africa Series* 1/1 (1956).

One Egyptian diplomatic cable stated: “Greetings to the Free Negroes from Free Egypt, and from all Free Men.”

[28] Michael Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine: Transnational Countries of Color* (Stanford University Press 2018)

<https://www.counterpunch.org/2004/01/17/the-use-and-abuse-of-martin-luther-king-jr-by-israel-s-apologists/>

[29] The debate over Africa’s support for Palestine would spill over into the mainstream African Studies community following the decision of 28 African states to vote in favor of a U.N. resolution condemning of Zionism as “a form of racism” in 1975. Five African countries opposed the resolution with twelve abstaining. Prominent Africanist scholars like Richard Sklar and Michael Lofchie penned an open letter denouncing the decision, while others, such as the founder of the Sudan Studies Association, Richard Lobban, supported it. See Lofchie, Michael and Richard Sklar. 1975. “Statement: Africanist and Jewish.” *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*. Vol. 5, No. 4 (Winter, 1975), p. 47; Lobban, Richard. 1976. “Response: Statement. Africanist and Jewish.” *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* Vol. 6, No. 1, p.63.

[30] Shirley Graham Du Bois, “Egypt Is Africa” *The Black Scholar* (May 1970); Shirley Graham Du Bois, *Gamal Abdel Nasser, Son of the Nile : A Biography* (Joseph Okpaku Publishing; 1St Edition edition (1972))

[31] “The Black Panther Party for Palestine” <https://samidoun.net/2016/09/the-black-panther-party-for-palestine-by-greg-thomas/>

[32] Steven Gregory and Roger Sanjek, eds., *Race* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), p. 188.

[33] Mahmood Mamdani, "Between the public intellectual and the scholar: decolonization and some post-independence initiatives in African higher education," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (Volume 17, 2016) p.68

[34] J.L. Kanywanyi, "The Struggles to Decolonize and Demystify University Education: Dar's 25 Years' Experience Focused on the Faculty of Law, October 1961 – October 1986." *Eastern Africa Law Review* Issue # 15 1989

[35] Babacar Camara, "The Falsity of Hegel's Theses on Africa," *Journal of Black Studies* (Sep., 2005), pp. 82-96

[36] "About Africa," UNDP in Africa: <https://www.africa.undp.org/content/rba/en/home/regioninfo.html>

[37] "What is sub-Saharan Africa?," *The Economist* (March 7 2019)

[38] Kenneth Waltz *Theory of International Politics* (1979) p.73

[39] Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (1987)

[40] Mitchell 2004: 16

[41] Mbembe, Achille. 2000. "At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa." *Public Culture* 12(1): 259–284.

[42] "Afro-Arab Borders: Conflicts and Conciliations" Organized by Eve Troutt Powell Chair and Khaled Fahmy, Joint Session ASA-MESA, Washington DC., November 20 2005; "Slavery in the Islamic World: Comparative Perspectives on Enslaved Africans in Middle Eastern and African Households" Joint Session ASA-MESA 2011, Washington DC.

[43] Middell, Matthias. 2017. "Are Transregional Studies the Future of Area Studies?" In Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge, eds. *Area Studies at the Crossroads: Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 289-307.