

⌘ The Griot ⌘

Wellesley College Africana Studies Department
2013 Newsletter



Chinua Achebe (1930-2013): A Tribute in Memoriam (page 11)

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Welcome!

This fifth edition of the Africana Studies Department newsletter, *The Griot*, contains news, reports and announcements that highlight the many ways in which the Department is enriching life at Wellesley College. In January, Professor Filomina Steady led a successful Wintersession in Jamaica. All the participating students shared that they had a wonderful learning experience. This year has also been marked by colloquia that have focused on Professor Obeng's ongoing research in India and events to pay tribute *in memoriam* of the father of modern African literature, Professor Chinua Achebe. Dr. Kwadwo Osei-Nyame, Jr. and Dr. Louisa Uchum Egbunike, both of the University of London, led the Achebe sessions. The events culminated in a dinner at which Professor Achebe's daughter, Dr. Chinelo Achebe Ejueyitchie, and family were present. All of these events have been well attended.

Professor Pashington Obeng, Department Chair

Swahili at Wellesley



Professor Geofred Mogere Osoro

Interview by Fiona Jamal '15

Professor Osoro was born and raised in Kenya, East Africa. He completed his undergraduate degree at Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya. Professor Osoro went on to complete his Master of Arts in Swahili Studies at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. He relocated to the USA in 2003 to pursue his doctoral degree at Michigan State University. He has taught Swahili at Michigan State, Kalamazoo College and Kansas State University. He also taught a Summer Swahili program at the University of Illinois. Professor Osoro joined the Wellesley College Africana Studies Department as a visiting lecturer in Swahili in the fall of 2012. He introduced a new element to the Africana Studies Department, as he is very passionate about teaching Swahili, the Department's inaugural language. As of fall 2012, students can now fulfill their language requirement with Swahili. Wellesley College is one of the few schools that offers a Swahili language program.

Who inspires you?

I am inspired by mother who worked so hard to have me and the rest of my siblings obtain an education. My mom did not have any secondary education but she knew that her children needed to have an education, so she sacrificed a lot to send us to school. I am very proud of my mother and I want to thank her for her continued encouragement and support.

How would you describe your first year teaching at Wellesley College?

My journey at Wellesley College has been a wonderful experience. I have enjoyed every second of it. My students are very enthusiastic to learn Swahili and the African culture.

I truly enjoy interacting and sharing my culture as well as teaching Swahili. We enjoy trips to the African grocery store to purchase ingredients to cook African traditional foods while speaking Swahili. I ensure that students feel engaged, comfortable and welcome in the classroom. By doing so, they embrace collaborative learning and will have an open mind about studying the African culture. Since language is communicative, students learn better when they are able to share their thoughts with one another. Students are encouraged to work in groups and perform traditional Swahili skits, songs, and dance. I also started a Swahili table for my students to practice speaking the language, I highly recommend other students to join the Swahili table. My students also started a Swahili Club to encourage more opportunities to engage in the language immersion. In addition, the Africana Studies Department is working on creating a Swahili language study abroad program to allow students to immerse in the African culture.

Why study Swahili?

Swahili or Kiswahili is a language widely spoken on the African continent. Swahili is the official language of Kenya and Tanzania. Knowledge of Swahili is essential if one is working in the East African region. It serves as a good vehicle to accessing Swahili culture and enhances the credibility of researchers interested in East Africa.

Who speaks Swahili?

There are over 50 million people who speak Swahili across the African continent. A little over 1 million people speak Swahili as their first language, while most others speak Swahili as their second language. Those who speak Swahili as a first language can be found along the coast of East Africa stretching from southern Somalia to the border between Tanzania and Mozambique.

AFR 105 & 201 Trip to New York City

By Professor Selwyn Cudjoe

It has always been my practice to take my students to places where they can experience in a practical manner the things they learn in their classes and in their books. Therefore, taking students to see plays that relate to what they are learning, or places in which important events to our development as a people took place, or even to enjoy the cuisine that typifies our people are important aspects of my methodology as a teacher.

Taking my students to New York to experience the best of Broadway, sharing in the cumulative wisdom of our forebears at places such as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and then dining at Sylvia's Queen of Soul Food Restaurant famed for its Southern African-American cuisine stand at the top of an excursion into African-American literature and culture. When we set off to visit New York City on that October day in the fall, I could not be more surprised by the beauty of the experience and the thrill our students and our colleagues took at experiencing such a marvelous delight. Even traveling on a New York subway turned out to be quite an experience.



Teaching young adults and preparing them to negotiate the world in which they will find themselves are the great challenges that I face as an educator. Trips to New York and other places help to humanize us and make us know that we share this wonderful world together and that we should cherish one another and respect the gifts that we bring to our common educational space.



AFR 105 & 201 Trip to New York City

A Student's Perspective

By Sylvia Kokutulage Ilahuka

Only in rare instances will college students willingly rise from their beds before seven o'clock in the morning – and much less so on a weekend to go on an educational outing. However, the morning of November 10, 2012, was no ordinary Saturday for the AFR 105 (Introduction to the Black Experience) and AFR 201 (African American Literary Tradition) classes. It was the day that we would be spending in the city of New York, under the guidance of Professor Selwyn Cudjoe. And what a wonderful day it would be.



One of the prints in the exhibit. Its enlargement stands strikingly in the foyer of the Schomburg.

We left Wellesley a bit later than planned, on account of the usual stragglers for whom we had to wait, but once the drive began, it was thankfully uneventful. Four hours later, we pulled into New York City and were dropped off in Harlem, right outside the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture – the wing of the New York Public Library (NYPL) dedicated to “documenting black life, and promoting the study and interpretation of the history and culture of peoples of African descent.” Opened in 1925, the Center is named after Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, an Afro-Puerto Rican, who gave his personal collection of books and other Afrocentric artefacts to what was formerly called the Division of Negro Literature, History and Prints of the NYPL. We were welcomed, given a brief history of the Schomburg, then proceeded to view the *Visualizing Emancipation* exhibit featuring 80 pre- and post-Civil War photographs of enslaved and free black women, men, and children. Following the viewing, one of the exhibit's directors engaged us in a discussion about the photographs. The images were truly unforgettable, and stand as a poignant reminder of African Americans' significant albeit oft-unacknowledged, involvement in the history of America as a country and a nation.

After we left the Schomburg, we rode the subway – with a touch of drama, as the trains were crowded and we lost one of us who accidentally boarded the wrong train but then had the smarts to get off at the correct stop – and disembarked in the hectic Broadway area. We made our way to the theatre where we saw “The Lion King” staged in all its glory. The play was funny and the costumes and set-up were breath-taking; all enjoyed the experience. Finally, a mind-filling day called for some belly-filling food. So we took the subway (and managed to stay together this time) back to Harlem and sat down in Sylvia's Restaurant for a dinner of its famed ‘soul food.’ After a hearty meal of fried chicken, fish, and potato salad, to name but a few of the dishes that were placed on our tables, it was time to return to Boston. We arrived back at Wellesley late in the night, enriched in so many ways. Thank you very much to Professor Cudjoe, Administrative Assistant Susan Lange, and the Africana Studies Department in general!



AFR 105 and 201 with Professor Cudjoe in the Atrium of the Schomburg, where poet Langston Hughes' ashes are interred, under the cosmogram in the foreground.

Welcome Dr. Layli Maparyan

Interview by Maya Thompson '13 and Temple Price '13

Dr. Layli Maparyan is the Katherine Stone Kaufmann '67 Executive Director of Wellesley Centers for Women and a Professor of Africana Studies.



Given your status as an alumna of Spelman College and as a tenured professor and director of WCW at Wellesley College, women's institutions have seemingly a large role in your life. Can you speak about that?

It feels great to be at a women's college because I think that there are certain benefits to single sex education. I'm a strong supporter of it and it's great to be at a women's college for the second time in my life. I think that the reason that single sex education is important, especially for women, is because women get to fulfill all the roles of leadership and to develop their talents without any interference from the sexism that tends to crop up in mixed-sex environments. I think that it really pushes women students to do their best and be their best. It also creates powerful networks that women can use later. I just see it as having a lot of advantages.

You are joining the Africana Studies faculty at Wellesley College and your ongoing work is building womanism. How do you define womanism? How does womanism fit into Africana Studies? How do you plan to implement it here?

Womanism is a social change perspective that was made by African American and African women scholars in the 1970s and '80s, and it is what I would describe as a culturally-situated social change perspective that draws from African perspectives as well as perspectives from women around the world. Even though African American women named it, it has attributes that relate to women from a variety of cultural backgrounds. In terms of the perspective itself I think it focuses heavily on social change through healing, social change through care, social change through spirituality and political activism, and bringing people together, rather than oppositional forms of struggle. I think there is a harmonizing, coordinating influence or orientation in womanism. I've written two books about it, so if you want to know more I explain in greater depth in my books, but that gives you kind of an opening sense about it. I'm going to be continuing the work on womanism while I'm here. I'm already lining up for my next book, which will be single author book about womanism as well.

When did the Wellesley Centers for Women first appear on your radar? How did you become aware of the Centers?

I became aware of the Centers when I was in graduate school. The Stone Center – which is one of the two centers that makes up the Wellesley Centers for Women – was putting out some very interesting research about identity, developing some new feminist theory about identity that was challenging psychoanalytic theories; and I learned about that work from the Stone Center when I was in graduate school. At that time it was still called the Stone Center; it was before the two centers – the Center for Research on Women and the Stone Center – merged into the Wellesley Centers for Women. I've known about them since probably the early 1990s. It has a very big national reputation as a research center. It's had a great reputation for rigorous research and innovative theory for decades.

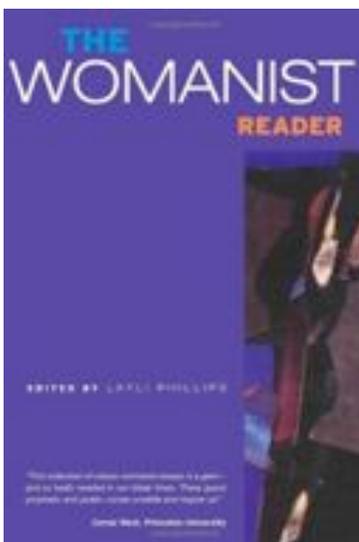
Tell us about your scholarly journey. How did you come to study the things that you study?

I would start by saying that I came from an academic family. Because my father was a professor and later a community college president, scholarly activity was always around me. My mother was a student of philosophy and my college major was philosophy. I don't think I necessarily planned to become an academic initially, but I sort of fell into it. After studying philosophy as an undergrad, I studied lifespan/human developmental psychology in graduate school. That's what I got my doctorate in, but I always had an interest in social change. Throughout my career I familiarized myself with social theory and social practices and began linking that to my psychology work. That's how I got involved with African American Studies and Women's Studies. So my academic career has always intertwined philosophical, psychological, and critical theory interests in the areas of gender, race, sexuality and spirituality.

Any advice for other black women entering academia?

Be strong. Be strong. But also don't be afraid to be who you are and bring your own perspectives because, due to its history, academia is lacking in women of color's perspectives. Part of our social responsibility in being here is making sure our cultural perspectives are represented in the academy and in the global knowledge base. Even though not every African American woman or woman of color is going to choose to study race or a culture-related topic, there are still ways in which we bring our cultural heritage and our unique perspectives into the academy. It's going to be a hard struggle to do that, but it's what we have to do. And we have to support each other so that people can make it. But I think it's important to remember that we have potential friends and allies everywhere, from all different kinds of backgrounds. We shouldn't assume hostility; we shouldn't come in defensive; we should come with openness and centeredness in who we are. I would also mention that in the U.S. professoriate, Black women full professors are a very underrepresented, small percentage. So I would encourage women to really go the distance so that we can get those numbers up. Know that it's a long, hard trek, but it's worth it for the larger community and worth it for helping academia be everything that it should be.

Professor Maparyan's books are...



The Womanist Reader, 2006



The Womanist Idea, 2011

African Indian Women's Ritual Power in India



For the Department's Fall 2013 Colloquium, Professor Pashington Obeng, Chair of the Africana Studies Department, presented a lecture entitled "African Women's Ritual Power in India." Professor Obeng shared his research on the important responsibilities of Siddi women in India. Although considered minorities because of race and disadvantaged because of gender, these women take on influential roles of spiritual mediators in their villages and communities.

Interview by Pelumi Botti '16

Professor Obeng, would you give us the historical background of the Siddis and discuss your research interests in Siddi women?

There are communities of descendants of Africa in south India. They arrived in waves of migration . Some arrived as enslaved people, some as merchants, and others as military or guards for the Portuguese, British, French colonial powers, Muslim leaders and Hindu political leaders. For centuries, India has been a patriarchal society. In the communities where the Siddis live, social interactions are organized by patriarchy. I was curious about how Siddi women religious figures would fare in such a society, being women and Siddis. So I focused on women ritual specialists on the household and community level. I interviewed women *fakirs* (religious specialists who bless people, sing and collect alms), *mujavars* (shrine or mosque attendants), mediums and healers. I discovered that, despite their minority status in India and the patriarchal system, Siddi women religious specialists are highly respected in India by Siddis and non-Siddis. They are respected in their own right as well as for their talents.

How long have you conducted your research on Siddi women?

I've been going to India for 17 years but conducting this specific research on Siddi women's ritual power for only a year

How can Wellesley students collaborate with you. Please expand on the summer opportunities.

Through the Center for Work and Service, students can apply for funding to do an internship among the Siddis in India. Since my research focuses on women, students interested in seeing the spiritual power of marginalized groups can interact with the women and learn firsthand how these women exert their agency in a society that tends not to give domain to women. It's a wonderful opportunity.

Africana Studies Department Colloquium



Louisa Uchum Egbunike

Chinua Achebe (1930-2013): A Tribute in Memoriam

Interview by Pelumi Botti '16



Dr. Kwadwo Osei-Nyame, Jr.

On Thursday, March 21, 2013, Chinua Achebe, the founding father of modern African literature, died in Boston, Massachusetts. To celebrate the life of this iconic figure, the Africana Studies Department held a colloquium entitled "Chinua Achebe: A Tribute in Memoriam". Guest lecturers from the School of African and Oriental Studies, University of London, Dr. Kwadwo Osei-Nyame, Jr. and Professor Louisa Uchum Egbunike spoke about Achebe's writings on civilizations and the Igbo world-view.

Please speak about Achebe's legacy on African literature.

KON: Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was an important form of African literature during the African Renaissance (post-colonial and independence movement). It stands as a testament that Africans have a voice. *Things Fall Apart* is a classic within world literature, a narrative of African reclamation. The novel also set the tone for other African writers. Achebe was the editor of the Heinemann African Writers series, a series of novels by African writers since 1962 published by Heinemann. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o gave his manuscript to Achebe to read.

LUE: *Things Fall Apart* was published during the heat of the Independence Movement. It was published one year after Ghana's independence and two years before Nigeria's independence. It was the third Nigerian novel published abroad and launched the Heinemann African writers' series. *Things Fall Apart* challenged Western perspectives on Africa by portraying an African society that highly functioned with its own judicial system, culture and economy. Achebe inspired other African writers that grew up in the British colonial education system. For example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the Nigerian writer, used Achebe as a reference. There is a thematic overlap with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, where she explores the overzealousness of African Christian converts. Several of Achebe's Igbo contemporaries have often been accused of mimicking Achebe's style of writing with their use of proverbs and exploration of similar themes.

What impact did Achebe's writings have on you personally?

KON: In secondary school in Ghana, the proverbs, language and cultural dimensions of *Things Fall Apart* appealed to us subconsciously. It offered a balance of knowledge within the colonial education system. I eventually did my Ph.D. on Achebe's works.

LUE: *Things Fall Apart* was the first African novel I ever read. I came to identify the novel with my grandfather's generation, as it is set very close to my hometown. So there were elements that were recognizable and unrecognizable. It taught me a lot about my own Igbo heritage. I also used the novel in school and it gave me a voice amongst my peers. Essentially, the novel set me on a trajectory to study African literature

Professor Emeritus Tony Martin

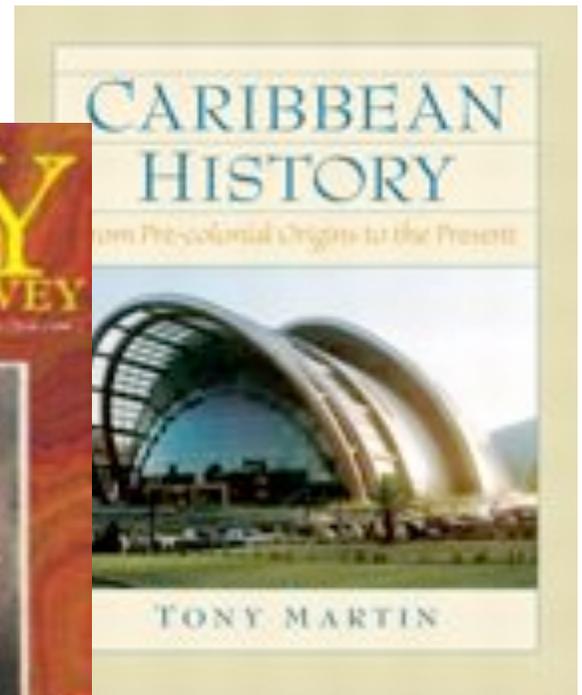
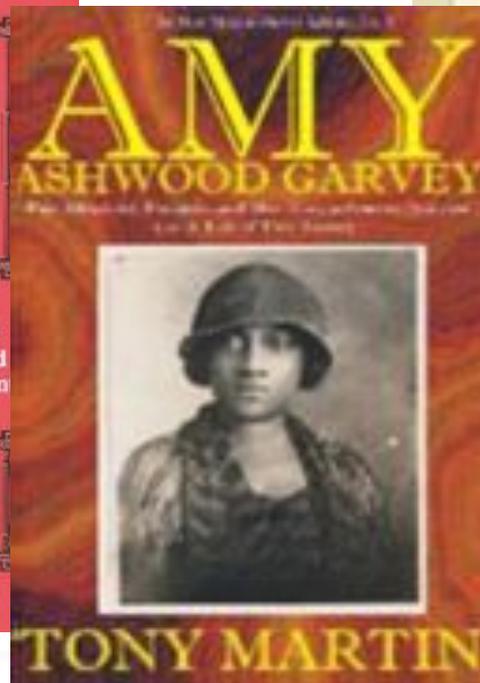
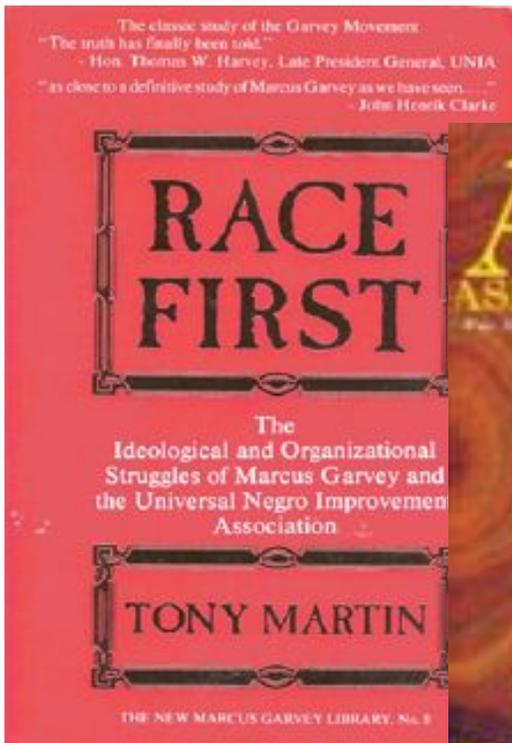


Professor emeritus Tony Martin died on January 17, 2013. A founder of the Africana Studies Department, he taught at Wellesley from 1973 until his retirement in 2007.

Professor Martin studied law at Gray's Inn, London, and was called to the English Bar in 1966. Subsequently, he received a B.Sc. degree in economics at the University of Hull (1968), and an M.A. and Ph.D. (1973) in history at Michigan State University.

The author or editor of 14 books, Professor Martin was best known for his works on Marcus Garvey, most notably, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (1976).

He also published articles in scholarly journals, such as the *Journal of American History*; the *African Studies Review*; *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*; and the *Journal of Caribbean History*. His most recent publication was the book, *Caribbean History: From Pre-Colonial Origins to the Present* (2012). During his career, Professor Martin also lectured throughout the world, in South America, Africa, and Australia, as well as the United States and the Caribbean.



The Africana Studies Department

Back: Professor Selwyn Cudjoe; Student Assistant Fiona Almeida DS '15; Professor Geofred Osoro; Dr. Layli Maparyan; Professor Donna Patterson

Front: Professor Pashington Obeng; Student Assistants Reyna Gilbert '14 and Pelumi Botti '16

Not pictured: Professor Filomina Steady; Susan Lange, Administrative Assistant



Meet the Department's Student Assistants:

Reyna Gilbert '14 is an Africana Studies major. She also minors in sociology, focusing primarily on race as a concentration. Her interests include urban development, international development and race in American society.

Fiona Almeida DS'15 is an Anthropology major and Africana Studies minor. She has worked with the Africana Studies Department since 2012. She is especially interested in people of African descent who were taken to Asia enslaved.

Pelumi Botti '16 is an International Relations-History major, with a concentration in African history. She fondly recalls her first Africana Studies class, "History of Francophone Africa," as pivotal in shaping her academic interest in the continent.

Essay Prize Winners

Fannie Lou Hamer Prize

Anneliese M. Klein '15

"Female Sexuality and Power in South Africa"

Ella Smith Elbert Prize

Rebecca L. Reeve '13

"Cross-Cultural Conceptions of Gender Unpacking Methods of Social Organization in Africa and the West"

Zora Neale Hurston Prize

Temple R. Price '13

"Michelle Obama Uses Clothing as Communication"

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