

**Abdul Karim BANGURA, *Research Methodology and African Studies, Vol. I,***

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**& *The Journal of Research Methodology and African Studies,***

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If the issue of methodology is essential for any researcher, it is perhaps even more so in African Studies. Area studies start primarily from a geographical and empirical, not a theoretical delimitation of their object of research. This makes the problem of the relevance of methods in relation to a complex and multilayered research object the first obstacle to overcome. Interdisciplinarity is, of course, the answer; but most researchers abandon this attractive approach when they move towards realism in assessing the extent of what they can reasonably handle. The individualism deeply entrenched in the academic profession makes the results of many (interdisciplinary) collective research projects often hypothetical. Researchers are faced with the usual problem of trying to marry a concern for accurate assessment of multidimensional realities with a more focused and rigid scientific approach, or the conflict between 'area studies and the discipline'<sup>1</sup>?

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<sup>1</sup> Robert H. BATES, *Area Studies and Political Science: Rupture and Possible Synthesis*, in *Africa Today*, Vol. 44, n.2, April-June 1997, p. 123-131.

A new journal, the *Journal of Research Methodology and African Studies*, is devoted to these issues. It was preceded by a book with the same title, which is a collection of essays presented by the panels on Research Methodology and African Studies at the 1991 and 1992 meetings of the United States African Studies Association. According to the authors of this collection, '*it evolved from the notion that research in the field of African Studies is in need of constructive change resulting from healthy debate over appropriate methodologies, the linkage of theory and practice, and ways in which African Studies research can be usefully compared to that of other fields.*' (p. 1). The same motivation guides the *Journal*, which edits the major part of the introduction to the book anew.

The editor of both book and journal is apparently the most suitable person to direct this very interesting and indispensable project: as the director of the Washington-based "African Institution" and having three PhD degrees (in Political Science, Linguistics, and Policy Sciences), M. **Abdul Karim Bangura** certainly guarantees a very broad and open approach. Since methodology is one of the most thorny issues every Africanist has to deal with, we can but welcome the journal and encourage its editorial board (and the potential subscribers).

The first problem one would expect to be dealt with is the adaptability of standard social science methods to African realities and environments. New thinking on this subject has seldom been done<sup>2</sup>. As a result, one has to rely mostly on anthropological methods which have their advantages and obvious limitations when used in other disciplines. This is why the approach of the editors is so attractive: the book offers a number of 'quantitative' and of 'qualitative' studies". The first group is, from this point of view, rather disappointing: the different chapters in the several disciplines limit themselves to a rather straightforward application of standard research methods to an '*African*' subject<sup>3</sup>, as the case of the rather quantitatively-oriented article in the first issue of the

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<sup>2</sup> We can refer to the method of 'histoire immédiate' ('immediate history') developed by a team of researchers around Benoît Verhaegen, who tried to combine the requirements of a scientific approach, the big financial and practical limitations of conducting quantitative research in African countries, and an ethical approach to its object of research. Cf. Benoît VERHAEGEN, *Introduction à l'histoire immédiate*, 1972; ID., *Sources et méthodes de l'histoire immédiate*, in Cahiers de l'actualité sociale, n° 2, IRSA-Kisangani, Juillet 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Some contributions give a short explanation of these - elementary - methods, apply them to their empirical material, but do not start from a theoretical discussion and do not draw a more than straightforward conclusion (contributions by Sawyer, Kimaru, Hill, Kamalu).

*Journal*. Two articles stand out as very useful contributions to this debate: the very stimulating and realistic contribution of **Olufemi Vaughan** about a grassroots perspective of African politics, and the one of **Emmanuel Uwalaka** on the conducting of survey research.

Two other contributions sketch the possible application of less orthodox quantitative research methods: the one by **Banks**, using a statistical "expansion" method to African Development processes and allowing for a degree of contextualization; and a second one by **Bangura** with an impressive statistical synthesis of nearly the whole existing literature (92 studies) on the causes of military coups d'état in Africa.

The 'qualitative' contributions deal more with the problem of methodological adaptability. The most interesting contribution, from this point of view, seems to be the article by **Olufemi Vaughan**, on studying 'grassroots' politics. The author gives a realistic insight into the formation of communal blocs and gives suggestions on how to study them. The first issue of the *Journal* is more disappointing, as it offers a collection of contributions in African Studies without really highlighting the methodological issues. **Richard M'Bayo** explains his methodological approach in the study of communication and information policies in Africa, but one hardly sees how his approach is different from a standard textbook approach. The contribution of **Robert Baum** on '*Transformative Geographies in West African Female Initiation Ceremonies*' is challenging and theoretically innovative research, but it does not address the issue of methodology at all. The article by **Gerald Smith** does not live up to its title '*Theorizing Neopatrimonialism: the Linkages Between Cultural Attitudes and Politics in Sierra Leone*', because it does not deal with "cultural attitudes" nor with their relationship to patrimonialism.

Finally, **M. Dumbuya** (in his contribution to the book) deals with the very relevant sensitive issue of the ethics of African Studies research. As the academic 'beast' often ignores its ethical dimension and responsibilities, **M. Dumbuya** reminds us usefully that we interact with human beings deserving all the respect we owe to them, and as they define it.

The challenge for the *Journal* in the future will certainly be to find useful contributions discussing the problem of how to adapt our "standard" research methods to a context where one has but few reliable standardised data, but where a researcher still wants to conclude in terms of more general propositions; how to develop creatively new research methods or find variations on existing ones; how to integrate methodology and theory. Obviously, methodology without theory is

blind. One of the big challenges (and threats) for the future of area studies is the lack of an actual theoretical framework. The *Journal* could take its methodological concerns one step further towards its integration with newer and relevant theoretical approaches. The issue of the "*relevance of rigorous indigenous paradigms and methodological approaches in the study of African politics*" (book , p. 152) may be generalized to all levels of African Studies.

Review by

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