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# The State of African Geography in the North American Academy

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**Editorial:**  
**The State of African Geography  
in the North American Academy**

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*William G. Moseley and Kefa M. Otiso*

**INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>**

This is the first of two articles we intend to publish during our editorial tenure on the state of African geography within the academy. More specifically, this article seeks to examine the production of new geographers in the United States (U.S.) and Canada who have regional expertise in Africa, whereas the second essay will analyze the size, number and productivity of geography departments at universities in Sub-Saharan Africa.

While area studies is a long standing tradition in geography (Pattison 1990), the organization of geographical expertise along regional lines died over 50 years ago as a result of critiques of geography's then chorological focus (e.g., Sauer 1956; Berry and Marble 1968). As a consequence, most contemporary geographers distinguish themselves via thematic specializations such as, for example, economic geography, urban geography, or biogeography. Nonetheless, many geographers continue to have a secondary specialization in a region of the world. As such, we have medical geographers with regional interests in Latin America or development geographers with interests in Africa. Given the continuing popularity of regional courses in geography departments at most U.S. and Canadian universities, now taught from the perspective of regions in a global context (Gilbert 1988; Pudup 1988; Terlouw 2001), it is geographers with secondary expertise in a particular region who often teach such courses. Despite the ongoing popularity of regional courses (and the need to staff them), some commentators are concerned that the North American academy is producing fewer and fewer scholars with regional expertise, including geographers with an area studies background (e.g., Robinson 2003; Robinson and Long 2005).

Moreover, rising geographic illiteracy in the U.S. led to the development of the National Geography Standards (NGS) in 1994 in order to increase public awareness on the role of geography in everyday life

and to rejuvenate geographic education in the U.S. As pertains to the theme of this essay, NGS sought to create a citizenry that, among other things, understood the interdependence of different peoples, the human and physical characteristics of diverse places and world regions, and the ways in which different world regions are changing (NGS 1994). In a rapidly globalizing world, the concern was that a country without expertise on other major world regions would make foreign policy missteps with negative ramifications at home and abroad.

Besides a general concern with the decreasing production of regional experts within the North American academy, there is also a worry about the unevenness of the limited geographical scholarship produced on Africa. In other words, some African countries receive considerably more scholarly attention than others (Zeleza 2002).

#### **OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY**

Given the need to continue offering regional courses on Africa, and the importance of area studies expertise within the academy more broadly, the objective of this editorial is to examine trends in the production of Africa-related geography PhDs at U.S. and Canadian universities. While a rather crude measure, we relied on dissertation titles published annually in the *AAG's Guide to Geography Programs in the Americas with Theses and Dissertations Completed* (AAG 1998–2008) to count up and classify Africa-related geography dissertations over the last 10 years (with the decision to examine the past 10 years being somewhat arbitrary). We first looked at the general production of Africa-related geography PhDs over the past 10 years in relation to overall production of geography PhDs. We then sought to identify the country focus of each Africa-related dissertation examined as well the thematic thrust of the work, i.e., was it primarily human, human-environment, physical or geotechnical geography. When such a country or thematic focus could not be gleaned from the dissertation title, we referred to the dissertation abstract (available electronically via dissertation abstracts). In situations where the dissertation was comparative across several African countries, we assigned a fraction of one to each country. Where the dissertation was continental or subregional in scope (the case for several climatology studies) it was designated as “general Africa.” We fi-

nally sought to understand which departments in the U.S. and Canada were producing the most Africa-related PhDs.

## FINDINGS

Over the past ten years, approximately 82 geography dissertations have been completed which deal with Africa in one way or another (see Table 1). This represents about 4.7% of all geography dissertations written during this period. While the number varies from year to year, an average of 9.6 Africa-related geography dissertations were produced per annum for the years with complete data covered in this study, 1999–2006 (data for the years 1998 and 2007 is incomplete).

The thematic distribution of Africa-related dissertations breaks down as 49% in human geography, 32% in human-environment geography, 15% in physical geography and 5% in the geotechniques (see Table 2). While not exactly comparable information, Bierly and Gartrell (2004) reported that the average North American geography department in 2001 had 5.19 human geography faculty (42.3% of total), 1.75 human-environment specialists (14.3%), 3.4 physical geographers (27.9%), and 1.91 geotechniques specialists (15.6%). Part of the difference (between our data and that presented by Bierly and Gartrell) is undoubtedly due to the fact newly minted PhDs tend to represent the direction in which the discipline is evolving, rather than the status quo depicted by the distribution of existing faculty. This said, the direction of change within North American geography departments (Bierly and Gartrell 2004) is for increasing numbers of human-environment, physical and geotechniques positions, and a declining number of human geography positions. The large number of African geography PhDs in the human-environment arena is consistent with this trend. The above average number of human geography PhDs (in African geography as compared to geography as a whole) seems natural given the development focus of many Africa specialists. The below average number of physical geography and pure geotechnical PhDs may reflect the non-place specific nature (especially for the latter) of some work in these areas. Geotechnical studies on Africa may also be limited by a lack of (especially socioeconomic) data.

**Table 1**  
**Production of Africa-Related Geography**  
**Dissertations in the U.S. and Canada, 1998–2007**

Year	Africa-Related Geography PhDs	All Geography PhDs	Africa-Related PhDs as a % of All Geog PhDs
1998	3*	172	1.7%
1999	11	159	6.9%
2000	8	200	4.0%
2001	12	201	6.0%
2002	10	205	4.9%
2003	8	176	4.5%
2004	8	206	3.9%
2005	10	211	4.7%
2006	10	222	4.5%
2007	2*	NA	—
Total	82	1752	4.7%

\* Incomplete data for these years.

**Source:** AAG Guide to Geography Programs in the Americas with Theses and Dissertations Completed, 1998–99 to 2007–2008 volumes.

**Table 2**  
**Africa-Related Dissertations from Geography PhD**  
**Programs in the U.S. and Canada by Broad**  
**Sub-Disciplinary Category (1998–2007)**

Total	Human Geography	Physical Geography	Human Environmental	Techniques
82	40	12	26	4
100%	48.8%	14.6%	31.7%	4.9%

**Source:** AAG Guide to Geography Programs in the Americas with Theses and Dissertations Completed, 1998–99 to 2007–2008 volumes.

Arguably one of the most interesting results of this analysis is the spatial distribution of dissertation research within Africa (see Table 3).

Figure 1 suggests, rather starkly, that there is a large swath in the middle of the continent that is being ignored by the emerging crop of geographers. The top five countries where PhD students (based at U.S. and Canadian universities) have undertaken dissertation research in Africa are: 1) South Africa, 2) Ghana, 3) a two-way tie between Kenya and Tanzania, and 5) a three-way tie between Malawi, Morocco and Nigeria. By far and away the most popular place to undertake dissertation research in the last 10 years has been South Africa (with 16 dissertations). Presumably the level of development in South Africa (relatively high) and predominance of English make this an easier place to undertake fieldwork. Furthermore, since the end of Apartheid in 1994, this arguably has been one of the more interesting places to study rapid change (of many varieties) over the last decade. Some of the same factors that make South Africa an attractive country for fieldwork (level of development and English) may also apply to Ghana, the second most popular site for dissertation research. Another influential factor may be the relatively large number of Ghanaian geography faculty and students in the U.S. and Canada, a fact not unrelated to strong geography training in Ghana.<sup>2</sup> English may also explain the popularity of Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Nigeria as research sites. Morocco is the only non-English speaking country in the top five. Its more advanced state of development, and the edging of the country in the American psyche by the movie *Casablanca* and the events of World War II, may help explain some of its popularity. Finally, all of the top five countries (excepting Nigeria) where PhD students undertake research benefit from significant North American tourist, study abroad, and/or Peace Corps interest, which may influence the trajectories of upcoming scholars (Peace Corps 2008). Furthermore, the early establishment of universities in South Africa (Roberts 1978), and the large colonial British populations of South Africa and Kenya, arguably gave these countries a head start in the creation of research and reference materials that have been built on and proved attractive to succeeding generations of researchers. The last area we examined was the productivity of geography departments in the U.S. and Canada in terms of Africa-related PhDs (see Table 4). Here, Clark University was the leader by a long shot (with 14 PhDs), followed by a tie for second between the University of Minnesota and Michigan State (6 PhDs each) and a three way tie for third between Ohio State, Queens University and the University of Iowa

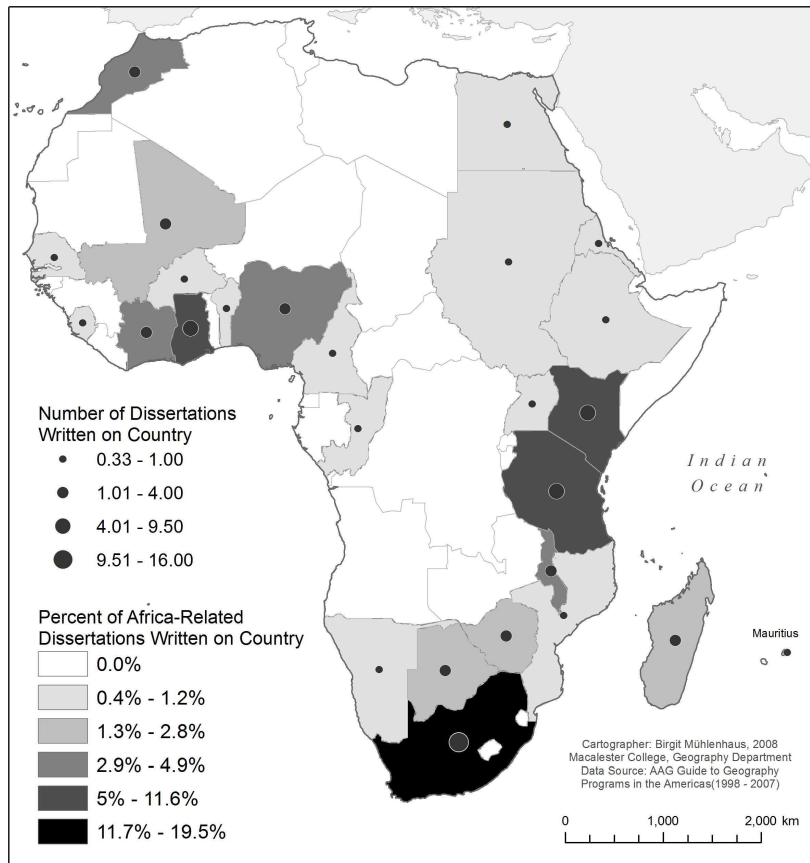
**Table 3**  
**Africa-Related Dissertations from Geography**  
**PhD Programs in the U.S. and Canada**  
**by Country of Focus (1998–2007)**

Country	# Dissertations	% of Total	Rank
South Africa	16	19.5%	1
Ghana	9.5	11.6%	2
Kenya	7	8.5%	3
Tanzania	7	8.5%	3
General Africa	6	7.3%	5
Malawi	4	4.9%	6
Morocco	4	4.9%	6
Nigeria	4	4.9%	6
Côte d'Ivoire	3.33	4.1%	9
Mali	2.33	2.8%	10
Botswana	2	2.4%	11
Madagascar	2	2.4%	11
Zimbabwe	2	2.4%	11
Benin	1	1.2%	14
Cameroon	1	1.2%	14
Congo	1	1.2%	14
Egypt	1	1.2%	14
Eritrea	1	1.2%	14
Mauritius	1	1.2%	14
Mozambique	1	1.2%	14
Namibia	1	1.2%	14
Senegal	1	1.2%	14
Sierra Leone	1	1.2%	14
Sudan	1	1.2%	14
Uganda	1	1.2%	14
Ethiopia	0.5	0.6%	26
Burkina Faso	0.33	0.4%	27

**Note:** In the case of dissertations which focused on multiple countries (often comparative studies), each country was assigned a fraction of a credit.

**Source:** AAG Guide to Geography Programs in the Americas with Theses and Dissertations Completed, 1998–99 to 2007–2008 volumes.

**Figure 1**  
**Africa-Related Dissertations from Geography PhD Programs in the U.S. and Canada by Country of Focus (1998–2007)**



(4 PhDs each). Clearly, faculty with Africa-related interests at these institutions explain some of the pattern. It may further help if these Africa-related interests amongst faculty are in countries where it is easier to recruit well qualified PhD students (such as Ghana) or where it may be easier to send U.S. or Canadian students (such as South Africa). The availability of funding from North American institutions for African students may also play a role. In a similar way, more forthcoming financial support for students with interests in subfields that relate well to Africa (such as many of the development related subfields) may provide further elucidation. Whatever the explanation, this ranking does provide food for thought for future students considering Africa-related PhDs in geography.



**Table 4**  
**Production of Africa-Related Dissertations**  
**at PhD Programs in the U.S. and Canada, 1998–2007**

Schools	# PhDs
Clark University	14
Michigan State University	6
University of Minnesota	6
Ohio State University	4
Queens University	4
University of Iowa	4
University of California at Berkeley	3
University of Kansas	3
Carleton University	2
Rutgers University	2
University of Florida	2
University of Kentucky	2
University of Maryland	2
University of Washington	2
West Virginia University	2
American University	1
Boston University	1
Florida State University	1
Indiana University	1
Laval University	1
Montreal University	1
Texas A&M University	1
Texas State University at San Marcus	1
University of Manitoba	1
University of British Columbia	1
University of California at Santa Barbara	1
University of Colorado at Boulder	1
University of Delaware	1
University of Georgia	1
University of Idaho	1
University of Illinois	1
University of Manitoba	1
University of Massachusetts at Amherst	1
University of Oklahoma	1
University of Oregon	1
University of Utah	1
Waterloo-Laurier Graduate Program University	1
Wilfrid Laurier University	1
York University	1

**Source:** AAG Guide to Geography Programs in the Americas with Theses and Dissertations Completed, 1998–99 to 2007–2008 volumes.

## CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, the results of the analysis presented in this editorial only scratch the surface of the issue. Nonetheless, these data give us a general sense of the volume, distribution of sub-regional and thematic foci, and sources of new Africa-related geography PhDs in the North American Academy. This is important as it is one measure of the discipline's newest human capital with Africa-related expertise. These data also raise some interesting questions. For example, will we have enough geographers with Africa-related expertise to train the next generation of students and policymakers? In light of the uneven geographic distribution of dissertation studies in Africa, what does this say about the state of our knowledge of the continent? Does this uneven state of knowledge production have implications for North American foreign policy towards Africa? How does the country focus distribution of North American geography PhDs with an Africa focus compare to that of, for example, the British or French academy (e.g., Stren [1994] suggests that the distribution of work by French geographers working in Africa is quite different)? Given the clustering of Africa-related PhD production in some graduate programs, should this trend be encouraged or would it be better if there were more poles of excellence in African geography? Despite the interesting set of questions raised by these findings, these results should be interpreted with some caution. Among other issues, this analysis is complicated by the following factors: 1) there are geographers who go on to conduct research in different African countries after their PhD (suggesting that the discipline's subregional African expertise may be more diverse than the picture presented here); 2) there are geographers who either cease to work in Africa after an Africa-focused PhD or begin working in Africa following a non-Africa-related dissertation; and 3) the North American academy is not solely reliant on its own scholarship, but may and does draw on considerable Africa-focused geographic research produced in other parts of the world.



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## ENDNOTES

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2 Based on observation and personal correspondence with Joseph Opong (University of North Texas) and Ben Ofori-Amoh (Western Michigan University).

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