

# **Response to Steven Feierman's 'writing history: flow and blockage in circulation of knowledge'**

Innocent Pikirayi

Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

innocent.pikirayi@up.ac.za

I would like to thank Steve for the address and for the advance draft copy of his paper, which I engaged with for this response. Although Steve wrote from the perspective of the discipline of History, my response attempts to encompass other disciplines within the broader humanities, the objective being to communicate the message more broadly. Writing about blockages in scholarship as Steve does, his address covers many aspects of concern in the domains of research and knowledge production in Africa. I would like to pick two aspects here, which are; access to knowledge, and, understanding perspectives in the writing of and about Africa.

Ultimately, the paper is about communicating the numerous researches emerging from current research, and how this fits into the 'global' scholarship of humanities research. The Nigerian scholar Iruka Okeke (2016) communicated her concerns around the universality of genomics, which she regarded as a global discipline – perhaps in monolithic terms, where scientists work hand in hand with other researchers, but in the process, she realises African scholars are compromised in the knowledge production process. It is important that her publication is contextualised in African Studies, because this is what they are ultimately about, in the larger scheme of things. This concern is equally prevalent in other disciplines, with the West seeking to produce universalised approaches in the sciences and the humanities. I do not believe that there is only one genomics, one history, one biology, one mathematics, one literature, etc., as such, literary. It is imperative that we consider the traditions of scholarship across the world, that have crystallised into these disciplinary domains that we seek to globalise or formulate into universal knowledge. History writing in Africa, for example, is not the same as in the West, because the objectives behind such an exercise are different. I would argue, this also applies to other humanities disciplines as well.

I want to briefly argue here that any attempts to globalise disciplines in the manner Iruka Okeke complains about in the sciences, is bound to fail. I resort to history to illustrate my case, by citing two prominent publications in the field of the history of ideas, delivered as part of the prestigious Trevelyan Lecture series at the University of Cambridge between the 1960s and the first decade of this century. These are Edward Hallet Carr, *What is History?* (1961) and Anthony Grafton's *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (2007). The debates in Carr are about how to write history in the just ended twentieth century, while Grafton focuses on the period 1550–1700, on how to read

the history of the time. Grafton focuses on the development of the theme *ars historica*, the genre of humanist historiography during the later Renaissance from earlier criticism of the humanists towards the new universalising in the sixteenth century; the religious, political, philosophical, scientific, and professional applications, and genre's demise in the eighteenth century. He argues that earlier scholarship on historical criticism had defined it too narrowly. The demise of *a. historica* was due to numerous internal weaknesses and shifting interests and criteria. Its scope had generated an information overload, and consequently seems to have lost relevance.

What one sees from these developments are unsuccessful attempts towards 'globalising' the writing of history. There are complex barriers involved in trying to write about the past. If one considers Francois Baudouin (1520-73), who advocated the study of art, coins, inscriptions, travellers' reports, and other para-historical texts, and for the inclusion of the histories of ancient and contemporary civilisations, resonances with humanities disciplines such as archaeology or deep history become apparent. A lot has changed in the writing of and reading of history, and this is also true for other humanities. For example, writing deep history, which subsumes archaeology or prehistory (see critique by Schmidt and Mrozowski 2013) in Africa has also changed, such that we no longer specifically talk about 'African archaeology', but 'archaeology in Africa'. The latter, in my view, implies a universalised, globalised discipline, no longer driven by local context (Pikirayi 2015).

Apart from the information overload, we seem to negate or forget local context. The African context, or local realities, as Steve appropriately puts it, matters quite a lot in our fields, if what we are writing about is to contribute meaningfully towards 'global' scholarship, and by that I am referring to the numerous researches that should now be synthesised to communicate effectively Africa's contribution to the rest of the world.

One thing that compromises context, is the very make-up of the modern nation state itself, founded as it were, from a context defined by colonial administrators, which in ways more than one, distorted so much a wide range of African realities, and consequently, the approaches needed to understand these. I am talking about, for example, colonial borders which dismembered many African societies. How do we make sense of this, and other contexts that we are writing about, given this anomaly? One of the best edited volumes here is one by Sati Fwatshak and Olayemi Akinwumi, which tries to make sense of colonial and postcolonial Nigeria. *The House that 'Lugard Built'* (2014), is in my view, an appropriate title that communicates a synthesis of essays about a territory that make up modern Nigeria. My point, is, to promote access beyond our current borders, we need to communicate the good scholarship that the African Humanities Programme (AHP) is generating, first among ourselves, and then beyond.

The keynote by Steve makes so much sense because it precisely attempts a synthesis of emerging, new research in humanities, including medical humanities, in Tanzania. I particularly take inspiration from his chapter in the edited volume he did with Philip Curtin, Leonard Thompson and the late Jan Vansina in 1978. The syntheses therein are really valuable not only in terms of teaching postcolonial African history, but also serving as a very useful baseline for supervising postgraduate students to this very day. There is much in that source that one can use to define new trajectories of research on the Maji Maji, coast-hinterland trading and other networks, slavery, and other topics, highlighting other important topics in humanities in eastern Africa.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Innocent Pikirayi* is a professor in archaeology, whose research focuses on the development and demise of ancient complex societies in southern Africa. His other interests are in the histories of ideas and how these have influenced and shaped the writings of deep history, especially in Africa.

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