Pensée 3: Reconceptualizing the "Regions" in "Area Studies"

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"Area studies" as a way of trying to understand human experience is undergoing a major transition. Questioning the connection between Middle East and African studies highlights important dimensions of the changing nature of area studies at the beginning of the 21st century.

The question reminds us that the "regions" at the core of the concept of "area" studies were and are constructs for the convenience of analysts. During the 1950s and 1960s, policymakers and scholars divided the world conceptually into regions for study. In the United States, the definition of these regions crystallized around the list of non-Western "world regions" studied in centers supported by funding initially authorized by the National Defense Education Act of 1958.

Although world regions had been (and are still) defined in many different ways, this 1960s conceptual division of the world became widely accepted. It is in this context that the regions involved in "African" studies and "Middle East" studies came to be defined. African studies became primarily the study of sub-Saharan Africa rather than the continent as a whole. The emerging cadre of professional "Africanists" tended to exclude the countries of "North Africa" from their subject matter.

The definition of the Middle East changed significantly from the early usage by military planners in the 1890s. However, virtually every definition excluded African areas beyond the Mediterranean coast. In one exception, the British War Office during World War II included the Horn of Africa, but by the 1960s, most people accepted the conclusion of one of the standard geography texts of the time that Sudan and the countries of the Horn were "more properly considered as parts of intertropical Africa."[1]

One important result of this division was that the two fields—African and Middle East studies—developed relatively separately, and the conceptual regions tended to become reified. People spoke of "culture continents" with distinctive identities,[2] opening the way for a vision of the world made up of separate—and clashing—"civilizations." Topics that did not fit into these two conceptual boxes tended to be marginalized in "mainstream" coverage of sub-Saharan Africa or the Middle East in conferences and professional associations.

These conditions contributed to two difficulties in the area-studies approach that are now changing. The first is a regionalist primordialism, which endows regions with some essential identity. As a result, interactions among regions are viewed as "borrowing" or "foreign" influences. However, interactions between the Middle East and "Africa" have resulted in dynamic cultural syntheses that

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are distinctively local but no longer simply manifestations of some primordial essence that has "borrowed" some foreign elements. Studies of these developments require "area-studies" expertise but also require transcending regionalist primordialisms. An interesting example of this postprimordialist analysis is Donald Wright's study of Islamization and globalization in "a very small place in Africa."[3] A dual regional studies approach, combining African and Middle East studies, is an important part of going beyond the primordialist perspective.

A second difficulty is a monolithic view of the dimensions of human activities in the region under study. Classical area studies tended to see geographic-physical, economic, cultural, and religious boundaries as being roughly the same. However, looking at the Middle East and Africa together reminds us that important regions or networks of interaction cross borders. The networks of Muslim pilgrimage that run from the Atlantic coast of Africa to western Arabia are an integrated region rather than two regions interacting. The networks of economic interaction have little relationship to the boundaries assumed by area-studies definitions of the Middle East and Africa. The classic study of the trans-Saharan trade from antiquity by E. W. Bovill[4] presents an important example of how economic enterprise does not conform to the regions of area studies. Studies of religious and economic relations between South Arabia and East Africa by scholars like Anne Bang[5] illustrate that there was no clear "regional" boundary between the Middle East and Africa in this broad swath of territory.

Within the framework of these thoughts, why and how should Middle East and African studies be connected? They need to be connected through scholarship that transcends the primordialism and monolithic definitions of old-style area studies because these two regions are not separate "areas" or discrete "civilizations." Instead, they are interacting and diverse sets of human experiences that historically have influenced and shaped each other. Understanding this will help scholars build a perspective and a methodology that avoids the dangers of old-style cultural essentialism that can lead not only to the conception but also to the reality of a clash of civilizations.

NOTES

[1]W. B. Fisher, *The Middle East: A Physical, Social, and Regional Geography*, 5th ed. (London: Methuen, 1963), 3.

[2]See, for example, Raphael Patai, *Society, Culture, and Change in the Middle East*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), 13–38.

[3]Donald R. Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2004).

[4]E. W. Bovill, *The Golden Trade of the Moors* (Princeton, N.J.: Markus Wiener, 1958/1995).

[5]See, for example, Anne K. Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family Networks in East Africa, 1860–1925* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

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