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# Trends in African and Asian Studies



With the eyes of the world today focused on Asia and Africa, academic people from all fields are watching developments on these continents.

Recently, a number of York faculty members from both the social sciences and the humanities set up an informal faculty Committee for the Comparative Study of Traditional Societies and Cultural Change to investigate cultural change in these traditional societies.

For the interested public, the Committee will offer both a series of seminars on the aspects of traditional Asian and African societies and cultural change, with occasional guest lectures by visiting scholars.

The Committee will provide a forum for discussion between Asianists, linguists, anthropologists, and specialists in the literature and philosophy of these areas.

### CAREERS

Historically, traditional Oriental studies grew out of the philosophical and philological work of biblical scholars and archaeologists. Originally referring only to the Near East, Oriental studies have grown to include all of the Asian civilization, past and present.

Such studies are particularly significant to us, for they have contributed greatly to European thought. Their influence is felt, for instance, in the movements of Enlightenment and Romanticism as well as in such new Western ideas as depth psychology, twelve-tone scale music, and Zen Buddhism.

African studies has developed somewhat differently. Northern Africa has been known since ancient times, and in fact, Islamic culture had been an established part of Oriental studies since the Middle Ages.

Africa south of the Sahara, on the other hand, did not become a subject of academic interest until Oriental studies led to an interest in comparative religions. Then Africa was investigated in the hope of finding living examples of the developing primitive religious notions by which

comparative religionists could attempt to follow the rise of the developed systems they were studying.

More recently, modern anthropology recast this field of study and the coming of independence has added a further dimension in political and economic interest in Africa.

Today comparative social studies makes use of a somewhat different approach, relying on a systematic preparation in one of the various disciplines coupled with field research in one or more areas of the world.

The need of modern area studies is to combine successfully the right measure of traditional and modern discipline studies to produce a scholar who has some knowledge of the culture and civilization of the area in which he chooses to work.

### SENSE OF THE TRADITIONAL

Above all, the social scientist has the responsibility of seeing that his words accurately represent the phenomenon he wishes to describe. He must always be aware of the danger of representing non-Western ideas and institutions in the terminology of the Western society. Such a course often serves to confuse the two systems and conveys a false impression.

This Committee realizes York cannot yet offer old Persian for the benefit of those who may always have dreamed of reading ancient rock inscriptions. But, they justly point out, if York is to build a great university, and not just facilities for 40,000 students, then it must also be prepared to serve such interests.

They see the ambition of the undergraduate as three-fold. First, our present undergraduate education is not professional. It does not prepare the student with a mass of specific knowledge but rather prepares him to make use of what knowledge he acquires.

In this way, the student can develop his capacity to think logically and with consequence, preparing himself to make sound judgments when called upon to do so.

Secondly, the undergraduate should acquire an understanding of his own traditions. To grasp the meaning of these as they have developed requires both an historical sense and an insight into our present society.

Finally, through a particular course of study, the undergraduate can hope to acquire an insight into a particular field of knowledge which introduce him to a science for analyzing problems as they arise in his own later situation.

In this context, studies of traditional societies and cultural change take on an even greater significance. At a new university one cannot expect to find all fields and interests represented. But what there is of non-Western studies will be a success only if it manages to convey some sense of new and different ideas.

Having insisted that undergraduate university education is not professional training, we should not overlook the fact that there are indeed professions and careers for which undergraduate and advanced preparation can have more or less relevance.

The first place is quite obviously in education itself. Today not only the universities but high schools and extension schools are concerned with classical and modern Oriental studies and have started non-Western programs.

As this interest in Oriental studies rises, there is a corresponding demand for further training of librarians and archivists familiar with the Asian and African areas and able to use European and Asian languages.

Government agencies are also engaged in assembling materials and translating. International agencies engaged in foreign affairs and economic aid require candidates with preparation in non-Western studies. Some banks, business and law firms have also become interested in this same background.

As a preparation for assuming the burden of all sorts of everyday problems and of analysis of one's own traditions and institutions, there is no better preparation than the confrontation with civilizations which conceive of things in ways wholly different from those of our own.



As the East becomes the focus of current events, universities like York are thinking about programs in Oriental Studies.

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