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## LETTER

### BOOK REVIEWS AND THE JOURNALS OF THE AFRICAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION

by Joseph J. Lauer (Michigan State University)

The African Studies Association's 1974-1979 policy of publishing book reviews in a separate annual journal needs to be reassessed. It is my contention in this paper that an *annual* cumulation poorly serves the information needs of the membership and that the parent journal does not need the extra space this division has provided.

Until mid-1974, the ASA followed the conventional publishing pattern for American scholarly associations. It produced the *African Studies Review* (hereafter, *ASR*), which was mailed three times a year to all members as part of the cost of membership which included a number of book reviews. Beginning with the second issue of 1974, the *ASR* has not carried reviews, except for an occasional so-called review essay. Instead, book reviews appeared in the *ASA Review of Books* (hereafter, *ASAROB*), a separate annual publication which is sent only to those willing to pay an additional charge. (The 1978 volume of *ASAROB* was free for ASA members.) ASA's decision to uncouple the book reviews from the journal package sent to all members was not a welcome development. And it contrasted with its several other efforts to provide information resources, such as bibliographies and compilations of current research, for its members and the wider community.

ASA's downgrading of book reviews contrasts with the trend in the journals of the major American disciplinary associations. Reviews have either formed an increasing part of the core journal (see Table 1) or they are grouped in a virtually coequal review journal, e.g. the *Journal of Economic Literature* or *Contemporary Sociology*, which is distributed to the membership on the same basis and with the same

periodicity as the parent journal. The *ASR* has followed a markedly different pattern. The modest level of 12, 21, 19 and 17 percent of its pages for reviews in the years 1970 through 1973 was reduced to 7 percent in 1974 and close to zero in subsequent years. If one were to combine the pages of *ASAROB* with those of the *ASR*, the picture shows some improvement: 33, 32, 34, and 30 percent for the years 1975-1978. But these figures cannot really be compared to those at the top of Table 1 since *ASAROB* is not normally a part of the membership package.

A comparison with other interdisciplinary area studies journals (see Table 1), including those of professional associations, shows that while the *ASR* is alone in suppressing reviews, others provide relatively little space for this function. Aside from the *Journal of Asian Studies*, which is probably the most prestigious area studies journal, the journals in this category show less attention to reviews than disciplinary journals. In some ways, this is surprising, since readers of an interdisciplinary journal would presumably be more interested in summaries of major contributions from other disciplines than in specialized articles, unless the article happened to be in one's own discipline. Disciplinary journals rather than interdisciplinary journals would seem to be a better place for presenting original research—a presumption verified in part by the citation analysis data presented below. By omitting or downgrading reviews, the area studies journal abandons one of its natural and needed functions—giving the members an overview of research in various disciplines as it relates to a limited geographical area.

In addition to lacking the prestige that comes with being published in the primary journal, the *ASAROB* reviews lack currency. Most of the books covered in the 1978 *ASAROB*, which came out in late 1978, were published in 1976 or earlier. Table 2 gives details on the proportion of books reviewed that were published within a year (i.e., during the same calendar year or the previous year) of the journal cover date. While the recent record of the *American Historical Review* demonstrates that editorial practices can improve currency, the decline in recency for *ASA* reviews occurred despite having the same book review editor during 1970-77 period. Clearly, the practice of holding reviews for an annual publication, plus delays in printing and distribution, have created an unsatisfactory lack of immediacy for most reviews.

The first issue of *ASAROB* proclaimed an "intention to increase the number of books reviewed" as a primary goal for the journal. The same goal could be achieved without sacrificing currency by either reducing the number of articles or by making the *ASR* a quarterly. A preliminary analysis of citations in the social science literature indicates that many *ASR* articles would not be missed if they had not been published.

The correlation between frequency of citation and significance is, of course, far from perfect,<sup>1</sup> but citation analysis is the most usable technique presently available for testing the perceived value of a journal. Thus, in order to test the importance of *ASR* to the scholarly community, one can count the number of citations to *ASR* articles recorded by the *Social Sciences Citation Index* or the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index* and compare this with the figures over the same period for other Africanist journals.

The date for 1977 and 1978 are presented in columns 1 and 2 of Table 3, which is based on the 1977 and 1978 *SSCI Journal Citation Reports*,<sup>2</sup> plus separate manual calculations for the *ASR* articles since *ASR* is not one of the journals covered in the ISI data base. Figures for the total number of times each journal was cited are also available, but these tend to exaggerate the value of journals with a longer publishing history.

Since some journals publish more articles per year than others, the *JCR* provides an "impact factor" for each journal to show the frequency with which the "average article" has been cited in a particular year. The 1978 impact factor, for example, is calculated by taking the total number of 1978 citations to articles appearing in journal *X* during 1976 and 1977 and dividing by the total number of articles in journal *X* during the same two years. The figures for Africanist journals are presented in columns 3 and 4 of Table 3.

Unfortunately, the use of the two previous years for the "impact factor" was a mistake. Because of journal reviewing procedures and frequent delays in publication, it normally takes two years before a published article reaches its peak impact. For the Africanist journals included in the 1978 *SSCI JCR*, 1976 articles were most frequently cited, followed by those from 1975 and 1974. Even 1972 and 1973 articles were cited more frequently in 1978 than those of 1977, a year which really should not be considered for the "impact factor". A recalculation for the 1975-1976 articles cited in 1978 is presented in column 5 of Table 3. The position of journals such as *ASR*, *CEA* and *IJAHS*, which frequently are behind in publication schedules, is substantially improved by this adjustment; but the relatively poor position of *ASR* is not significantly changed.

The data presented in Table 3 indicate that the *ASR* has had a relatively small impact, and it is far from being a significant journal. It ranks far behind such London-based journals as *Africa*, the *Journal of African History*, and the *Journal of Modern African Studies*. The five journals with obviously

lower scores have handicaps not shared by *ASR*—one is in a foreign language, two are relatively new, and the two published in Africa have relatively specialized focuses. Curiously, *ASR* ranks about the same as other established North American journals—*Africa Today*, *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (which is partially in French), and the *International Journal of African Historical Studies*.

Any conclusion based on the limited data from Table 3 must be tempered with a number of caveats. There is the oft-mentioned case of a mediocre article that will be cited in refutation, although the distortion from such cases has not been measured. Second, the impact of a journal clearly varies from year to year, being dependent to some extent on both current interests and the years chosen to measure "impact". Third, one highly visible article, such as Wallerstein (1974) <sup>3</sup> which accounted for about 25 percent of all 1977 and 1978 citations to *ASR* articles, can exaggerate the significance of the "average" article, if it falls in a year used to measure "impact". Fourth, "impact" might depend on journal circulation figures, although the latter is hardly an independent variable; and in this regard *ASR* should benefit from its tie to *ASA*. Fifth, when the number of citations is small, the failure at *ISI* to recognize journal abbreviations or apparent mistakes in counting the number of source items can create a significant margin of error in the calculated "impact factor". Sixth, *ISI*'s omission of most of the valuable but generally smaller (and often delayed) periodicals from Africa (and elsewhere) must be acknowledged. But *SSCI* and *A&HCI* combined do cover about 50 percent of the English-language periodical articles that are listed in the *International African Bibliography*, <sup>4</sup> and this should be sufficient for an analysis of *ASR*'s impact.

Finally, citation impacts for journals from different fields or disciplines are not always comparable. For example, history journals with articles based primarily on non-periodical literature usually have lower impact rates than journals in economics, sociology, political science, or anthropology. If one considers interdisciplinary journals as a separate "discipline", then *ASR* should be compared with *African Affairs* or the *Canadian Journal of African Studies*; and it would not look quite so weak. But that would be a best-case presentation, with *Africa* being considered as an anthropology journal and the *Journal of Modern African Studies* as a journal in socio-economic development. Because of the recent predominance of political science and other social science articles in *ASR*, less favorable comparisons with *JMAS* do not appear unfair.

In conclusion, *ASR* has not had the type of impact one expects from the core journal of a major American scholarly association. But the pattern of generally low "impact" for most area studies journals suggests that the problem might be the nature of the journal. To the extent that authors share this view, this becomes a self-fulfilling assumption. This suggests the need to re-examine the role of journals such as *ASR*.

## NOTES

1. see, e.g., Peggy C. Smith, "Books published in higher education: A study of the most cited and significant" (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1979), cited in *Dissertation Abstracts International*, v. 40, p. 1916-A.

2. Eugene Garfield, *SSIC Journal Citations Reports: A Bibliometric Analysis of Social Science Journals in the ISI Data Base* (Philadelphia: Institute for Scientific Information (SSCI Annual, v. 6, 1978 & 1979), for 1977 & 1978. The 1978 *JCR* was based on 7.5 million citations from 600,000 1978 articles in the 4,000 *SSCI* and *A&HCI* source journals received at *ISI* by April 1, 1979.

3. Immanuel Wallerstein, "Dependence in an Interdependent World: The Limited Possibilities of Transformation within the Capitalist World Economy," *ASR*, v. 17, no. 1, 1974, pp. 1-26.

4. A rapid analysis of 209 entries (about 10 percent of the total) in the 1978 issue of the *International African Bibliography* revealed references to 134 periodical articles or a total of about 1350 per year. Of these, 29 percent were foreign-language articles that, regrettably, are poorly represented in the *ISI* data base. Only 25 percent of the total were in journals covered by the *ISI* data base. Based on this sample, about 350 *Africana* articles would be in the 1978 *SSCI*; of these, around 200 are in the strictly *Africanist* journals listed in this paper. Articles in the journals added to the *ISI* data base with the recent creation of the *Arts & Humanities Citation Index* should be added to this preliminary estimate, and the total would approximate 450-500 *Africana* articles per year in the *ISI* data base.

*IAB* is assumed to be the most comprehensive current listing of scholarly *Africana* literature. Data on its completeness would be welcome.

TABLE 1

## BOOK REVIEWS IN JOURNALS AS A PERCENT OF TOTAL PAGES

	<u>Year</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Percent</u>
<u>Major Disciplinary Journals:</u>				
American Historical Review	1968	55	1978	59
American Political Science Rev.	1968	20	1978	46
American Anthropologist	1968	35	1978	39
American Sociological Review	1968	30	1978	§
American Economic Review	1968	28	1978	§
<u>Major Area Studies Association Journals:</u>				
Journal of Asian Studies	1967/8	34	1978	48
Latin American Research Rev.	1967/68	0	1978	24
<u>Other Area Studies Journals:</u>				
Journal of Latin American Studies	1969	20	1977	22
African Affairs	1968	26	1977	13
Journal of Modern African Studies	1968	14	1977	17
Africana Journal	-		1978	28
Africa Today	1968	13	1978	33

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§ Reviews now carried in a separate membership journal.

TABLE 2  
CURRENCY OF BOOK REVIEWS

<u>Title of Journal</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>No. of Reviews</u>	<u>Percent Within a Year</u>
African Studies Review	1970	33	88
	1971	66	62
	1972	58	66
	1973	42	71
	1974	18	72
ASR & ASAROB	1975	80	20
	1976	82	20
	1977	72	11
	1978	106	23
American Historical Review	1974	1099	37
	1978	1187	78
Journal of Asian Studies	1967/68	249	73
	1977/78	310	39
Latin American Research R.	1975	59	75
	1978	77	3
Africa Today	1968	47	74
	1978	55	33
African Affairs	1968	136	80
	1977	93	54
Africana Journal	1978	77	65
J. of Latin American Studies	1969	25	68
	1977	64	37

TABLE 3  
IMPACT OF AFRICANIST JOURNALS

Journal Cited	1	2	"Impact Factor"		5
	No. of times post- 1969 articles were cited in :		1975-76 articles in 1977	1976-77 articles in 1978	Impact of 1975-76 articles in 1978
	<u>1977</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>in 1977</u>	<u>in 1978</u>	<u>in 1978</u>
J. of African History	120	133	.63	.82	.89
J. of Modern Afr. Stu.	148	127	.70	.59	.71
J. of Southern Afr. Stu.	2	26	.04	.56	.65
Africa	77	90	.62	.50	.55
African Affairs	45	61	.18	.34	.38
Africa Today	21	24	.29	.18	.24
Intl. J. of Afr. H. Stu.	11	27	.11	.10	.22
Canadian J. of Afr. Stu.	39	42	.25	.21	.20
African Studies Review	30	31	.17	.14	.20
Cahiers d'études afric.	18	28	.03	.09	.16
African Studies	15	20	.08	.16	.11
African Social Research	8	5	.18	.00	?
J. of African Studies	3	3	.00	.00	.02

Source: SSCI JCR, 1977 & 1978; data from ASR.

Note: Columns 1, 2 & 5 include citations from ASR. Columns 3 & 4 do not.