

A Brief Note on the Beginnings of ACAS

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As I recall, it was David Wiley's idea to convene a group of us at a meeting of the African Studies Association (ASA) in, I believe, Houston to discuss what we could do to promote an activist position on African questions. The context was double. On the one hand, the situation in Africa was difficult: deteriorating politics of the countries that had achieved independence (military coups, etc.); and blockage of liberation in southern Africa, aided and abetted by the U.S. government. On the other hand, there had just been the 1968-inspired split among Africanists, with the crisis at the 1969 Montreal meeting of ASA, and the creation of the African Heritage Studies Association (AHSa).

We made two decisions right at the start. One was that we would call ourselves "Africa scholars" and not "Africanists." It was a moment of sensitivity about terminology. And the second was that we wanted ACAS somehow to bridge the split between ASA and AHSa. The way we would do that was twofold: We would hold our meetings neither during an ASA meeting nor during an AHSa meeting but separate from both. And we would have co-chairs at every level, in order that we could draw one person linked with each of the two organizations.

We did this for several years. It didn't really work. First of all, it was expensive and difficult to hold a separate meeting, and not too many people could come. So, after several years, when the hostility between ASA and AHSa had cooled down, we decided to meet during the ASA meetings, and have been doing that ever since. We continued to have co-chairs, but it lost the element of balancing ASA and AHSa.

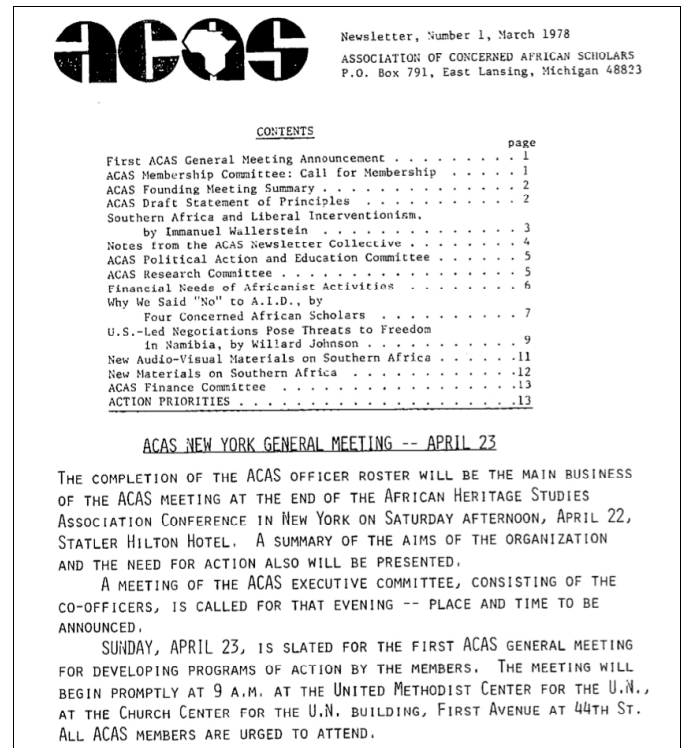


IMAGE: COVER, ACAS NEWSLETTER 1 (1978)

For a long time, ACAS concentrated on the issue of the liberation of southern Africa, which seemed the right priority. But once all that was finally accomplished, ACAS had to rethink its role and its activities, which was difficult at first, but has now, I think, been done.