

Memorial minute for Mitzi Goheen

Miriam Goheen, known affectionately to everyone as Mitzi, passed away on November 8th 2019. Between 1986 and 2015 she held professorial appointments in the departments of Anthropology and Black Studies. Mitzi chaired both her departments at different times and served on numerous college committees, as well as on the editorial board of the *African Studies Review*.

Mitzi Goheen was born on August 15th 1942 in Bellingham, Washington at her grandparents' farm, Arborcourt. She grew up in Corvallis, Oregon, where her mother was a librarian and her father worked as a professor of mathematics at Oregon State University after his Marxist political views ended his Harvard career at the height of the McCarthy era.

Mitzi's academic career began inauspiciously when, at the end of her senior year in high school, where she was a cheerleader, she eloped with the captain of the football team. Over the next twenty years, with the unwavering support of her parents, Mitzi raised her son, Patrick Mahaffey, worked multiple jobs to help support her husband through college, completed her own undergraduate education at Oregon State University, and eventually earned a PhD in anthropology from Harvard University in 1986. These personal details situate the paradoxical cornerstones of Mitzi's life and career: a white woman raised before the feminist revolution, whose non-traditional route into a male-dominated profession in academia made her a role model for marginalized female students and students of color at Amherst College; a Harvard-trained economic anthropologist with a soft spot for student athletes, especially football players; an unapologetically Marxist intellectual with a sartorial preference for glamour and glitz; and a loyal friend, for whom the adage "it takes a village to raise a child," so central to her experience of early motherhood, defined her involvement with the Cameroonian grassfields kingdom of Nso; the unstinting generosity with which she made space in her home for friends in need of shelter; as well as the nurture and love with which she surrounded other people's children.

Mitzi's Harvard mentor, the Sri Lankan economic anthropologist, Stanley Tambiah, encouraged his students to take a historically grounded, materialist approach to their fieldwork. Mitzi highlighted this approach in her introduction to *Radical Egalitarianism: Local Realities, Global Relations*, an essay collection she co-edited in 2013 in his honor. It also informed her fieldwork in Nso, where she undertook her life's work and found a true home. Mitzi lived in the Nso kingdom periodically over sixteen years, in the course of which she was accorded the title Yaa Nso (Nso Queen). She proudly wore the ceremonial headgear she received to mark that occasion at many Amherst graduations. She also wore daily the ceremonial antique ivory bracelets she was given, until a misguided customs officer decided that they were smuggled contraband and confiscated them.

As a respected elder in the Nso community, Mitzi saw it as her responsibility to nurture and support all its members. Each time she returned, she took with her mountains of clothing, ranging from serviceable sweaters and jackets that were much needed by residents of Nso's chilly, mountainous grassfields, to stylish and completely impractical high heels and cocktail dresses that also were much sought after. One year, she had T-shirts bearing images of Nso's royal family printed for all the children in the community, and she always made sure that the

other female elders distributed her contributions equitably. Mitzi also paid the school fees for several children in Nso, organized donations of scarce pharmaceutical supplies for Nso's Baptist mission-run hospital, and made sure that the young men and women who helped her collect data for her research projects received ongoing professional training when their work with her ended. Further afield, she worked indefatigably to support the careers of African scholars engaged in cultural and economic research. These included Amherst Copeland fellows Nantang "Ben" Jua, now a professor of political economy at South Carolina State University; Jacob Olupona, now professor of African religious traditions at Harvard University; and Cyprian Fisy, who went on to become Director of the Social Development Department of the Sustainable Development Network at the World Bank.

The major fruit of Mitzi's academic labor in Cameroon was her monograph *Men Own The Fields, Woman Own The Crops: Gender and Power in the Cameroonian Grassfields*, published in 1996 by the University of Wisconsin Press and considered today a classic in anthropology and gender studies. The study examines how in precolonial and colonial Nso culture the division of labor and property broke along gender and community lines. Men owned the fields and women owned the crops, but this arrangement, far from being settled and uncontested, was the subject of constant negotiation within households and communities. Women worked the land that their husbands owned, that ownership coming either by inheritance or delegation from the chief. Women farmed the land and sold the harvest, but the husband could assert the right to the profits from those sales. While men benefited from the sale of crops, many women had sufficient power--derived from their economic productivity--to retain a portion of their profits and to allocate some of the produce for household consumption. In the post-colonial years, the trend that had begun in the later colonial period of growing increasing quantities of cash crops led to a shift in the gendered balance of power, with men taking the profits from all cash crops for their personal use. These stark social and economic changes were mediated through a discourse of culture and "tradition," with women and men deploying different notions of what "tradition" required. Mitzi's study demonstrates how this gendered dynamic informed the complex historical process that determined systems of land tenure, external and internal politics, and marriage in the communities around Nso. It also speculates that such shifts may have contributed to the emergence of a new class of elites, as it is mostly better-educated women from wealthy families who have managed to maintain their former gendered power in the household.

Mitzi's classes at Amherst were always heavily enrolled. Consequently, she had numerous opportunities to challenge the ideological assumptions of a wide variety of students over the three decades of her teaching career. Her introductory anthropology course was the first sustained encounter with the theory of evolution for most of the first year students who took it, and Mitzi spent hours each fall semester vigorously dismantling the skepticism a not insignificant number of them harbored about the theory's validity. Similarly, Mitzi's popular course on African cultures and societies disabused generations of students of the notion that the continent of Africa had no culture, introducing them to a wide range of African states, each with its distinctive cultural forms and complex social histories. In her course on economic anthropology, a favorite with athletes heading to careers on Wall Street, students encountered alternative economic systems that operated successfully alongside the mainstream economic models they knew best. For many American students at Amherst, Mitzi's courses marked a turning point in their intellectual development, the moment they were first challenged to revise

their assumptions about how cultures and societies operated beyond their small corner of the world. For international students, especially students from Africa, Mitzi's courses validated social structures and socio-economic realities they had experienced but had never had the opportunity to examine from an academic perspective.

By the end of her time at Amherst College, Mitzi had become increasingly disillusioned with academia. Although her mathematician father had been at the forefront of the computational developments that launched the digital age, she never made peace with the computerization of the workplace. To the very end of her career she wrote out her copious comments on students' weekly papers by hand, even when arthritis made that an exceedingly painful exercise, and she could never remember her email password. A social theorist who traced her intellectual pedigree through the works of Gramsci, Habermas, De Certeau, and Baudrillard, she deplored what she saw as the increasingly transactional nature of relationships between students and faculty and between the faculty and the administration, abandoning attendance at faculty meetings well before she entered phased retirement. She especially distrusted the rationalization of college bureaucracy and our growing reliance on virtual networks over face to face communication to get faculty business done. From her obdurately Marxian perspective, she divined in our willingness to go along with these changes a capitulation to the demands of late capitalism that she feared would destroy what was most valuable about communities, within and beyond academia. The irony that these memorial remarks will enter the faculty record remotely would not have been lost on her.

Mitzi not only valued the face to face interactions, the rituals and the story-telling that were the foundations of her anthropological praxis; she also understood the centrality of food to such rituals. Many of her colleagues dined at her table, drank wine, sometimes palm wine, and saved roasted chickens from being scorched, as they swapped stories long into the night. Mitzi brought this love of food and nurturing to the classroom as well. Long after gluten free snacks and zero calorie drinks had become the rage, she insisted on sharing junk food with her students on a weekly basis. The last course Mitzi taught in Fall 2015 was a first year seminar for a group of students who have now completed their senior year at the height of the COVID-19 crisis. I remember that they pooled their resources to buy the junk food for their last class with Mitzi - a cake covered with chocolate frosting - and to give her a card thanking her for spoiling them rotten. I remember, too, that Mitzi asked me repeatedly to keep an eye on Chimaway Lopez, a Native American student in that group, who would ferry all Mitzi's books and bags back to her office at the end of class and then stay on for hours talking about ideas—in the way Mitzi felt students who were genuinely interested in intellectual growth should want to do at a college like Amherst. This fall, Chimaway will become the first student in the inaugural cohort of Mellon-Mays minority fellows at Amherst to enter a PhD program. We think Mitzi would have been proud to know that he is planning to follow in her footsteps, making the ideas about social justice and alternative models of community that he discussed with her the centerpiece of his future academic research.

Those of us who knew Mitzi well were conflicted about preparing this memorial. Mitzi adamantly refused to have a retirement party and she often talked about how remote she felt from Amherst College by the end of her career. However, on reflection, we realized that it was important to place into the record of our community the accomplishments of a colleague who

understood her life's work to have been about sustaining community. Mitzi's example reminds us that we should not have to choose between investing in valuable academic work and investing in the lives of others; that it is possible to be deeply theoretical and deeply nurturing at the same time; and that there need not be a conflict between the adornment of the body and the improvement of the mind. In addition to her son Pat, daughter-in-law Debbie, and grandchildren Harry, Siobahn, and Alfred, she leaves behind Steve Fjellman, who remained her partner, her caregiver, and hero until the end, as well as two brothers and their families, multiple official and unofficial godchildren, and very many dear friends and colleagues scattered over several continents.

Madame President, these remarks were prepared by Rhonda Cobham-Sander, Rowland Abiodun, Lisa Raskin and Sean Redding. On behalf of my colleagues, I move that they be entered into the minutes of the faculty by a vote of silence and ask for a copy of the minutes to be sent to Mitzi's family.