

# IN MEMORIAM

Robert J. Cummings

Elliott P. Skinner

## ROBERT J. CUMMINGS

Robert J. Cummings, better and fondly known as Bob, was born on December 22, 1940 in Tallahassee, Florida. He received a BS degree in European History from Florida A&M U in 1963, an MA in American History from North Carolina Central U in 1966 and a PhD in African Economic History from the U of California-Los Angeles in 1975 with a dissertation entitled "Aspects of Human Portage With Special Reference to the Akamba of Kenya: Towards an Economic History, 1820-1920." He conducted the field research for this dissertation in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania between 1972-1973, with funds from the US Department of Education and UCLA's Office of Minority Fellowships. He also obtained a Certificate in Ki-Swahili and African Culture in 1969, funded via an NDFL Fellowship in African Studies in conjunction with the Fulbright-Hays Program for Foreign Study, UCLA/University of Nairobi. At UCLA, he was one of the founders of the graduate students' African Activist Association and the student journal, *UFAHAMU*.

Bob Cummings was an economic historian who contributed significantly to scholarship in African History and African Studies. His prolific teaching and writings concentrated on a range of theoretical and empirical issues, and such topics as famine and drought in Africa, African migration and national development, labor and transport systems, US foreign policy towards Africa, African economic systems, capitalism, regional trade developments, the relations between African American Studies and African studies and, most recently, globalization and its implications for African economies. His book, with Robert S. Browne, entitled *The Lagos Plan of Action vs. the Berg Report* (1985) was among the first major scholarly exploration and analysis of African thinking and perspectives on development and the impact of international financial institutions on Africa.

Bob Cummings' teaching career spanned many decades and many institutions both in the United States and Africa. He taught Social Sciences at Mickens High School in Dade City, Florida from 1963-1966. During the same period (1963-1965), he also worked with the Pasco County Unit of the Florida State Penal Institution. In 1965, Bob embarked on a stellar career of teaching at the college and university level. His initial appointments were as an Instructor of History at St. Leo College in Florida, Instructor of European History (1966-1969) at Winston-Salem State University, North Carolina, and Senior Teaching Associate in Afro-American History at UCLA (1970-1972). While conducting research in Kenya in 1972, Bob also taught African History at the U of Nairobi. Upon his return to the US from Kenya, he was appointed Assistant Professor of History at University of Miami in Florida, 1973-1976. He also directed the Afro-American Studies Program.

In Fall 1976, Bob Cummings came to Howard University in Washington, DC, and replaced the late Leon Damas of Negritude fame as Director of the African Studies and Research Program. Over the years, he methodically built the program into a major national and international center for the interdisciplinary study of Africa. During his first tenure as Director from 1976-85, Bob embarked on one of the greatest projects of institutional transformation and development in many years at Howard U. He strategically recruited high caliber scholars such as Ntalaja Nzongola, Bereket Habte-Selassie, Wilfred David, John Lewis, Bob Edgar, Luis Serapiao, Melsome Nelson-Richards, Mbye Cham and May Yacoob. In addition to this new faculty, Bob benefited from the services and collaboration of older faculty members such as Ibrahim Shalaby, Joseph Applegate and Sulayman S. Nyang, a colleague who rejoined the department in 1976 after three years in the Gambian Foreign Service.

During his tenure, Bob Cummings brought in a number of internationally renowned and experienced scholars and civil servants to work on projects for short periods of time. Prominent among these were a former US ambassador to Liberia and a US representative on the Board of Directors of the Abidjan-based African Development Fund, Robert Browne, who was also a former adviser to Congressman Walter Fauntroy. Together, they co-edited the seminal text, *The Lagos Plan of Action vs. the Berg Report* (1985). Bob also brought in scholars such as Hailu Fulass, a distinguished Ethiopian linguist and Tsehaye Teferra of the Ethiopian Community Center and a prominent African advocate in the US.

In addition to receiving numerous prestigious grants, awards and consultancies over the years, a major achievement of Bob Cummings in his first tenure as Director between 1976 and 1985 was competing for and winning a major grant from the US Department of Education to establish Howard U as one of seven Title VI African Area Studies Centers nationwide (and, perhaps, one of two in the East coast at the time) offering training and instruction in African languages and cultures. Until 1985, Howard U was and still is the only HBCU to have achieved this distinction.

In his second tenure as chair of the Department of African Studies from 1994 to 2006, he helped consolidate the transformation of the African Studies and Research Program from the sole departmental unit in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences into a Department of African Studies as a unit within the College of Arts and Sciences, offering both the BA degree as well as a MA and PhD. The department is the only department in the US that offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees in African Studies. He continued the project of building the department with the addition of Ayo Langley, a former head of the Gambia Civil Service and World Bank Director, Alem Hailu, an Ethiopian scholar who worked closely with him in the organization of many conferences and seminars on Africa and international issues, and Almaz Zewde, a specialist on education, women and rural development in Africa.

Of all the African issues that Bob dealt with, none commanded his attention and energy more than the freedom struggle in South Africa. He was a leading advocate and supporter of anti-

apartheid causes and projects, and contributed significantly to bringing about US sanctions against apartheid South Africa. In 1994 he played a key role in organizing and leading Howard University's Observer Delegation to South Africa's first democratically-held national elections. In 1998, he was appointed by Howard University President, H. Patrick Swygert, to serve as the second Scholar-in-Residence in Cape Town for the Howard University-Republic of South Africa Project (HURSAP). In addition, the Institute for International Education called on him to serve its South Africa Education Program (SAEP) as Senior American Scholar from 1993 to 1997.

Bob Cummings was passionate about his teaching and his engagement inside and outside the classroom with his students. He had a special talent for energizing students and making them think critically about Africa and her Diaspora. People who knew him were inspired by his seriousness of purpose and commitment to teaching, learning and research. His colleagues in the department and beyond appreciated his cheerfulness and eagerness in intellectual debates and discussions. Students and faculty members who were privileged to associate with him recall his pleasant and sharp sense of humor and his signature laughter that captured both his wit, charm and generosity.

Bob Cummings was a leader and active participant in many professional associations both in the US and abroad. He is counted among those African American scholars who worked tirelessly and effectively over many years to significantly orient the African Studies Association (ASA) toward new areas of inquiry such as Diaspora studies. In 1985, Bob Cummings earned the distinction of becoming the first African American ever to be elected President of this august body, paving the way for others such as Edmund Keller (1992), Gwendolyn Mikell (1997), Sandra Greene (1998) and, currently, Pearl Robinson.

Bob Cummings was also a man who recognized the dynamic interplay between town and gown. He was an activist on African issues. He was personally known to many members of the Congressional Black Caucus where he also did duty as Senior Africa Research Fellow in 1984 in the office of Congressman William H. Gray, III (D-Pa). Bob served as an adviser on African issues to Reverend Jesse Jackson's presidential

campaign in 1984. He actively engaged with diplomats from many African countries here in Washington, DC as well as at the United Nations in New York. He was a consultant for the European Union and UN Commission for Human Rights. He served as the principal organizer for the Trans-Atlantic Conference on Racism and Xenophobia in the US and Europe sponsored by the European Union.

Bob Cummings' passion for Africa and her Diaspora and his always alert consciousness of their enduring linkage was well known. His commitment to nurture this passion and consciousness is shared strongly by his wife, academic colleague and partner in life and scholarship, Mel, and it is something they have cultivated in their two children, Dr. Samori Cummings and Attorney Samir Cummings.

Our prayers and love go to Mel, Samori, Samir and all the members of the immediate and extended family. We honor and celebrate the life and achievements of an extraordinary human being, a great scholar, teacher and mentor, an energetic and courageous administrator, a generous international public servant, a committed activist, a friend; and we commit to continue and build on the monumental and proud legacy of Robert J. Cummings.

Submitted by Mbye Cham, Howard University, April 12, 2007.

Editor's Note: A Robert J. Cummings Memorial Scholarship fund has been set up in his name at Howard University, Department of African Studies.

## ELLIOTT P. SKINNER

Elliott Percival Skinner, a resident of Watergate South since 2000, passed away peacefully on April 1, 2007. He will be greatly missed by his wife of 25 years, Dr. Gwendolyn Mikell, his children Victor, Gail, Touray, Sagha, and Luce, 7 grandchildren, 1 great grandchild, 4 siblings, and a host of uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces, in-laws, and other relatives, colleagues and friends.

Dr. Skinner was Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology - Emeritus, of Columbia U in New York City, where he taught for 40 years. Born in Trinidad and Tobago, he arrived in the United States just in time to serve in the U.S. Army in the European Theater of Operations from 1943 to 1946; he attended the U of Neufchatel in Switzerland prior to returning home. He received his BA from the U College of New York U, and received his MA in Anthropology as well as his PhD in Anthropology (1955) from the Graduate Faculties of Columbia U. In 1966 he was appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson as the United States Ambassador to Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) and served until 1969. In 1968, while serving as Ambassador he was

awarded the Commandeur de l'Ordre National Voltaïque by the President of the Republic of Upper Volta.

He served as Chairman of the Anthropology Department at Columbia from 1972 to 1975. In addition, he has held a number of prestigious fellowships including a Guggenheim and the Fulbright 40th Anniversary Distinguished Fellowship at the U of Abidjan in Cote d'Ivoire (1987). He was the former Chairman of the Association of Black American Ambassadors, a member of the Board of Trustees of the U of Bridgeport, a member of the Council of American Ambassadors, and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations since 1976. He was a prolific writer, and the author of over twelve books beginning with *The Mossi of Upper Volta* (1964), including *African Urban Life: The Transformation of Ouagadougou* which won the Herskovits Award for the best book on Africa in 1975, as well as *African Americans and United States Policy Toward Africa, 1850-1924, Vol. I* (1993).

Submitted by the African Studies Program at Georgetown University, April 4, 2007.