Maxwell K. Owusu, Ph.D., professor of anthropology in the College of Literature, Science and the Arts, retired from active faculty status on December 31, 2021.

Maxwell Owusu attended the London School of Economics and Political Science where he earned a B.Sc. Hons. degree (sociology, economics) in 1963. He then attended the University of Chicago where he earned his M.A. degree in social science (comparative politics, anthropology) in 1966, and his Ph.D. degree in anthropology in 1968. His dissertation won an Outstanding Dissertation award and was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1970 as Uses and Abuses of Political Power: A Case Study of Continuity and Change in the Politics in Ghana. Professor Owusu joined the University of Michigan’s Department of Anthropology faculty as an associate professor in 1973 and was promoted to professor in 1979.

Professor Owusu’s research focuses on sociopolitical transformation in late twentieth century Africa, primarily in Ghana. He has written extensively on the importance of culture and economics for understanding political processes across Africa, including democratization, nationalism, party politics, liberalization, populism, traditionalism, colonialism, constitutionalism, civil (dis)order, and coups/rebellion/revolution. Highly cited articles include “Tradition and Transformation: Democracy and the Politics of Popular Power in Ghana” (Journal of Modern African Studies, 1996), where he argues that African politics cannot be understood without attention to local concerns and local institutions (family, clan, chieftaincies). In “Domesticating Democracy: Culture, Civil Society, and Constitutionalism in Africa” (Comparative Studies in Society and History, 1997) he analyzes how democracy comes to be established, and in the process “domesticated,” in African contexts. And in “Ethnography of Africa: The Usefulness of the Useless” (American Anthropologist, 1978), he identifies and critiques bias in key canonical ethnographic texts on Africa and argues for more careful comparative cross-cultural research. Professor Owusu taught courses in African cultures, anthropology of law, and Caribbean societies and cultures for both anthropology and Afroamerican and African studies, served on departmental and dissertation committees, and on numerous editorial boards for national and international journals.

The Regents now salute this distinguished researcher and teacher by naming Maxwell K. Owusu, professor emeritus of anthropology.

Requested by:

Sally J. Churchill, J.D.
Vice President and Secretary of the University
February 2022