

So Many Africas, So Little Time: Doing Justice to Africa in the World History Survey

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There has been a recent flurry of attention to the topic of Africa in world history.¹ The issue has come up repeatedly on both H-Africa and H-World in the past several months. The Board of Directors of the African History Association saw fit to sponsor two panels on “Globalizing Africa: Placing Africa in World History” as “of special interest” at the 2003 meeting of the organization.² *Historically Speaking: The Journal of the Historical Society* will publish a special forum on the subject in the fall of 2004. And, obviously, *World History Connected* has chosen to do a special issue on the topic as well. All of this attention to Africa in world history is good and proper, and reflects the happy reality that world historians are more seriously considering Africa as an integral and influential part of the human story and that Africanists increasingly see the world as an important context for African history.³ Despite such attention and progress, however, our work is far from finished. Indeed, in the essay that follows, I will argue that despite significant advances in our scholarly understanding of both African and world history, these advances have largely failed to work their way into the vast majority of world history survey classrooms. Instead, most representations of Africa continue to be built around highly generalized and stereotypical “notions of Africa.” Only when we move beyond these oversimplified notions of Africa can we begin to “do justice” to the continent’s historical complexity and diversity, and to teach more effectively Africa’s role in world history. Towards this end, I will here examine what I believe to be some of the key reasons why Africa continues to receive marginal treatment in all too many world history surveys. Further, I will examine what I believe to be some of the most common misrepresentations of Africa in world history teaching. Finally, I will offer brief

thoughts on strategies to help teachers and scholars more effectively present Africa in the context of world history.

Africa in the World History Classroom

Africa has long had an uneasy relationship with the field of world history. From the earliest Enlightenment-era attempts at what we might now recognize as world history to the first comprehensive, synthetic world histories of the 20th century, scholars as diverse as Hegel and Toynbee have shared a common perspective on Africa: that it wasn't really part of the "historical world." One would be wrong to deny, however, that quite a bit of progress has been made in the past century. Thanks to such pioneers of African History as Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. Dubois, and also to the rise of African Studies as a discipline since the 1950's, much has been done to amend the notion of Africa as "ahistorical." There now exists a large and complex body of scholarship on African history. Further, there has been no small synergy between the expanding research fields of African and world history. One need only look at the substantial role played by scholars of Africa such as Philip Curtin, Ross Dunn, Patrick Manning, Joe Miller, David Northrup, and others in the development of world history over the past few years to see the reality of this exchange. Such efforts have led to changes in the materials available to teachers at the grassroots. An examination of contemporary world history textbooks will reveal that almost every text dedicates at least a couple of chapters to African topics.

There appears, nonetheless, to be a continuing disconnect between the remarkable advances in African and world history scholarship and the actual teaching of Africa in the world history classroom. Intermittent attempts to gauge student perspectives towards Africa reveal that stereotypes and misconceptions about Africans and African history continue to be the norm, rather than the exception.⁴ Certainly my own experience of teaching African and world history at a variety of colleges and universities over the past decade bears this out.⁵ Most students are more likely to think of Africa in terms of "ancient tribes" or as "stone age" than as a continent characterized by a diversity of ever-changing societies and civilizations – despite the fact that many, if not most, have taken world history courses before. Similarly, students are more likely to know about the (contemporary) Masai or "Bushmen" than a host of historical societies and states such as Aksum, Ancient Zimbabwe, or Benin. Thus, the "rubber" of African and world history scholarship has failed to meet the "road" of grassroots world history teaching. This is not a situation to be taken lightly. For many students, a world history survey can be a critical element in the formation of their first cognitive map of the world's history. If certain components of that history are consistently omitted or misrepresented (positively or negatively), then what sort of understanding of the world, past and present, will they establish?

It is impossible, however, to place the blame for this situation on any single segment of society or academia. Certainly, popular media plays a powerful (and not very constructive) role. Who can blame so many teachers and students for thinking the Masai are representative of Africa when they can be found everywhere from Nissan commercials to *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issues?⁶ How can we hope for balanced perspectives on modern Africa when late-night television appeals bombard us with images of starving African children, and when even “respected” media institutions such as the *New York Times* focus almost exclusively on African disasters and failings?⁷ Further, we cannot escape the fact that these modern media images of Africa both feed off of and reinforce centuries-old stereotypes and even overtly racist notions of Africans.

Quite opposed to these negative images of Africa exists a perspective that presents an overly rosy picture of African history. Not altogether correctly attributed to “Afrocentrism,” these images are often characterized by what Africanists call “Merrie Africa”—an idealized image of historical Africa as a land characterized by egalitarian societies living in harmony with one another and with the natural world.⁸ One thing these incompatible stereotypes of Africa suggest is that while students are willing to admit ignorance about many aspects of world history, most think they know something about Africa. As a friend and colleague who teaches a freshman Afro-American studies survey recently lamented to me: “Almost all my students think they know a lot about Africa, and almost all of them are wrong.”⁹

The disparity between the extremes of negative and positive images of Africa points up yet another difficulty facing those who seek to teach Africa in the context of world history: the political nature of the field. In all my classes I caution students that “the past is always political,” but there are few if any areas of history more political than those (like Africa) that engage teachers’ and students’ notions of racial identity. Thus, teaching Africa means treading into a veritable minefield of cherished beliefs, assumptions, and sensitivities. No doubt, the potentially high-stress nature of teaching African topics accounts in part for the relatively small footprint of African history within world history classrooms. Especially at the public school level, teachers are rarely encouraged, much less rewarded, for addressing and engaging controversial and potentially divisive issues. Thus, perhaps the overly generalized and stereotypical presentation of things African in many world history classrooms is a coping strategy on the part of instructors. By sticking to “safe” stereotypes of African history the teachers can avoid controversy by teaching what their student audience already thinks they know.

No small share of the blame, however, must also be laid at the feet of Africanists themselves. Until fairly recently, African Studies was a small field that was limited largely to a handful of elite research institutions. As such, African history has been fairly “top heavy” in terms of its emphasis on highly methodological scholarship, with the vast majority of articles and monographs being produced for a small and highly trained

audience. Sadly, this reality has meant that a great portion of the scholarship produced by Africanists has proven inaccessible to non-specialists (which describes almost all those teaching world history, especially at the secondary level). It is hardly a surprise, then, that this audience has chosen to look elsewhere for African resources, often turning to sources that are, in the eyes of Africanists, dubious at best. But let's face it—*National Geographic* is far more user-friendly for most teachers than the *Journal of African History*. In recent years African Studies has grown beyond the research institution tier of Academia, and hopefully the spread of scholars to more teaching-intensive institutions will help facilitate both the writing of materials more accessible to non-specialists as well as a new generation of teachers who have studied Africa at the college level.

A final consideration must be given to the brutal challenge of teaching world history itself. No field asks so much of its instructors and prepares them so little. Faced with the absolute impossibility of covering all of human history with any sort of equanimity, teachers are forced to brutally winnow the scope and depth of their coverage.¹⁰ Given, as outlined above, the pervasive biases that serve to stereotype African history in one way or another, the political complexities of the field, and the inaccuracies or impenetrability of the resources available to world history teachers seeking to do right by Africa, there can be little surprise that most instructors wind up providing a rather shallow and over-generalized perspective on Africa. What all too often results from this situation are what I have elsewhere dubbed “notions of Africa.”¹¹

Notions of Africa

There are, indeed, what appear to be several different “Africas” that compete for attention in world history classrooms. Each has a certain internal coherence. But, largely through selection of and overemphasis on certain aspects of African history or culture, these various notions present painfully problematic oversimplifications of Africans' role(s) in world history. Presented below is a brief overview of these competing versions of Africa. I hope they will serve as a caution for those both teaching and studying Africa.

Primitive/Static Africa

This is probably the most enduring stereotypical paradigm for presenting Africa in world history. Here Africa serves as a “foil” to the progress and eventual modernity ostensibly found elsewhere in human history. The basic idea here is that by looking at Africa, one is somehow transported back in time. Warning flags for this particular stereotype of Africa should go up whenever the term “ancient” is used to describe anything in contemporary Africa. For example, “the Masai are an ancient tribe” or “the ancient process of basket weaving.”¹² Further, using contemporary Africans as an example of ancient human behavior, such as citing the modern Khoisan (aka

“Bushmen”) as an example of Paleolithic hunters and gatherers, is a hallmark of this particular oversimplification of Africa’s place in history.¹³ Similarly, this notion of Africa often relies upon a characterization of Africa as “isolated.” This perspective suggests that any part of the continent that experiences contact with other parts of the world is somehow not “real” Africa. Herein lies the tendency to try and define sub-Saharan Africa as the “real Africa” and areas that regularly interacted with other world regions as somehow “less African” or even “de-Africanized.”

To avoid falling into this particular trap, teachers and students need to consider that African societies, like societies everywhere, have constantly undergone processes of economic, social, political, and technological change. Examples of such change include the radical transformations that came with innovations in agriculture and metallurgy, the development of long-distance trade systems in salt, copper, gold, and kola, and the centuries-long participation of Africa in the spread and development of Christianity and Islam. Looking at such broad developments and exchanges, it is difficult to see Africa as either static or isolated. At least for contemporary issues, African newspapers (easily accessed via the internet) provide an excellent window through which students can catch a glimpse of how many Africans see their world.¹⁴

Exotic Africa

In many ways, this notion of Africa shares key components and tendencies with Primitive/ Static Africa, although this perspective tends to crop up more in the context of cultural or anthropological discussions than in those regarding historical periods. The key component of the “Exotic Africa” perspective is that it selects for aspects of Africa that teachers and students find “different.” Indeed, the more foreign or seemingly outlandish a cultural aspect, the more likely it is to become part of the notion of Exotic Africa. Exotic Africans seem to spend their entire lives performing one ceremony or another. As already alluded to, certain groups, such as the Masai, are over-represented in popular portrayals of Africa precisely because they so fit western notions and desires of what Africans are supposed to be like. A painfully overt case of the Exotic Africa stereotype was the “African Edventure” website recently hosted by Arizona State University. This website chronicled the journey of a fungal biologist across Africa during 1999 and 2000, and featured, among other things, a cartoon of the safari-clad biologist shaking hands with a spear-holding and skull-wearing African. The original website is, at the time of my writing this essay, blissfully no longer available. Sadly, Google reveals hundreds of links to the site by primary and secondary schools in the US, Europe, Australia, and South Africa – a clear sign of just how readily the Exotic Africa notion has been, and continues to be, embraced.¹⁵

Perhaps the first step in dealing with Exotic Africa is to address the stereotypes head on. For example, during a recent visit to a local secondary school, a student’s description of Africans as ‘people who drink blood’ led us to a discussion of the Masai. I

asked the students “of roughly 700 million Africans, how many do you think are Masai?” The initial answer was 200 million. After a bit of prodding that this was perhaps too high, the students pragmatically reduced the number to 50 million. When I said that the total population of Masai was more likely in the range of less than 1 million, and thus only a small fraction of one percent of the total African population, I was left with a thoroughly perplexed group of students. From here I was able to move into a very rewarding discussion of why the Masai seem to loom so large in our popular image of Africa, despite the fact that there aren’t actually very many of them. Indeed, one of the key goals of addressing Exotic Africa is to discuss African diversity. Representing millions of Africans via the Masai is, quite simply, wrong. The Masai may be roughly representative of East African pastoralists, but to push the comparison any further is misleading at best.¹⁶

The challenge raised by this notion of Africa is to balance what is perhaps unique about African settings and societies against the dangerous tendency to revel in the exotic. At the root, the question is whether we want to teach students that Africans are inherently “different from us” (which is the essence of defining them as exotic) or as essentially similar, although living in what were (or are) different economic, political, social, and physical environments. Indeed, by looking at the reality of Africa’s experience in world history, we gain a much more complex and complete understanding of key historical themes and grand narratives. For example, how have Africans experienced and influenced the expansion of world religions? How has industrialization influenced Africa, as opposed to Europe? What of the African experience with contemporary “globalization”?¹⁷ Such questions allow endless opportunities to challenge students’ notions of Africa. Tell your students that American country music has been wildly popular in Africa for decades, and you can’t help but shake up their conception of the world.¹⁸

Environmental Africa

Another common “notion” of Africa is one that seems to lack human agency. Here we find an Africa that is populated almost exclusively by thundering herds of wildebeests, majestic elephants, proud lions, and any number of other critters. When humans do enter into the story of Environmental Africa, they exist either as part of the landscape, or as a threat to it. For example, during my last trip to the Cincinnati Zoo, I made a visit to the gift shop, only to find a coffee-table book entitled *The Bushmen* for sale side-by-side with nature photography books on elephants and lions.¹⁹ Such a presentation suggests that “Bushmen” exist only as part of the landscape – though in a sort of idyllic and harmonious way. In contrast, Environmental Africa is also inhabited by “bad” Africans who threaten to destroy the continent’s otherwise pristine landscape via poaching and deforestation. Thus, Environmental Africa often represents “primitive” Africans as good and “modernized” Africans as bad. Environmental Africa is often presented as

something of a “last Eden,” an unspoiled wilderness that must be isolated and protected from the encroachment of destructive modernity.

The warning flag for Environmental Africa should go up any time a teacher finds him or her self showing documentaries set in Ngorogoro Crater or any other famous East African game preserve. To avoid the Environmental Africa stereotype, teachers and students must realize that Africa, like every other part of the world, has experienced a long process of human interaction with, and modification of, the environment. Examples of African crop domestication and systems of environmental management for the control of tse-tse flies, for example, can be used to highlight this long process of give-and-take between humans and the African environment. It is also important to stress that Africans are far more involved in the urban and “modern” than the wild. I like to point out that the vast majority of Africans are thousands of times more likely to see a Mercedes on any given day than they are to see a lion, elephant, or other “wild” animal.

Broken Africa

This is perhaps the most contemporary version of Africa – an Africa where nothing ever works and all good intentions come to naught. This image of Africa stresses all the bad things about Africa, highlighting political corruption, famine, violence, and sickness as the defining characteristics of African life. For example, in her popular *Food in History*, Reah Tannahill dismisses the very idea of African cuisine because “... when shortages are the currency of everyday life, filling the stomach is the only art.”²⁰ Thus, because Tannahill believes Africans have always been on the verge of starvation, she assumes that nobody ever took the time to develop tasty recipes. Anyone with experience in the diversity and edibility of African cooking would find this a laughable notion. Sadly, Tannahill’s book has been in print for three decades without this brutal absurdity being corrected.

While all too many observers seem to embrace the stereotype of Broken Africa, the explanations for Broken Africa seem to be legion. They could be attributed to the brutal African environment, dysfunctional African culture, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, or rapacious capitalist globalization. The upshot, however, is usually the same. Africa is broken and is doomed to remain so indefinitely. Africanists often refer to this perspective as “Afro-pessimism,” the idea that there is no hope for Africa in the foreseeable future. Given the very real challenges facing all too many contemporary Africans, it is of course important not to ignore many painful African realities. On the other hand, a comprehensive approach to contemporary and historical Africa shows us that such modern hardships are the exceptions to the rule, and are hardly an accurate representation of any abstract (much less permanent) African reality.

Utopian Africa

Here is an image of Africa that stands in sharp contrast to the negative generalizations already discussed. Utopian Africa is the abode of egalitarian societies living in harmony. This Africa often serves as an idealized land for those disaffected with the racism or the greedy materialism of modern life in the “West.” Here, every village raises every child, and wise elders solve every problem through consensus. Utopian Africa exists for many as a vision not so much of modern Africa, but as a glorious African past. If it exists no longer, its destruction is often attributed to the hostility and duplicity of outside aggressors. Such images of a Utopian Africa are often rooted in a nationalist approach to African history and culture that assumes a “natural” unity for all people of the African “race.”²¹

“Utopian Africa” is a particularly difficult notion of Africa to critically engage in the world history classroom. Given the politics and sensitivities of race already discussed, engaging this idealized Africa is a supreme test of a teacher’s diplomatic skills. Like all the other “notions” of Africa, it is critical here for the teacher to encourage students to question why they think of Africa in a certain way, and to use the answers to think more critically about their own beliefs and assumptions. Similarly, it is often worth noting that to romanticize a time or place is never to do it historical justice. Just as we deny the complex humanity of individuals we characterize as “heroes,” we deny historical reality when we idealize any historical setting. Every region of the world comes with its own collection of achievements and failings, good and evil.

Conclusion: Rethinking Africa in World History

A fairly predictable solution to the problem posed by the existence of many flawed and competing “notions of Africa” would be for teachers of world history to gain enough knowledge of Africa to present the single “right” history of Africa and Africans. I would argue, however, that to try this would be yet another mistake. Indeed, the common theme among all the stereotypes of Africa discussed here is that each suggests that the complex and intricate history of Africa can be boiled down to some single essence or generalization: “Africa is like this.” To deny the intricacy and diversity of African history is to visit a terrible indignity upon the continent, since such a claim suggests that African history is somehow less complex than that of other parts of the world (such as Europe) which tend to receive closer examination. Moreover, as is so often the case with history, those who suggest that there is a simple answer often do so because they have an agenda to advance. In this case the agenda is to use Africa to make a point about some aspect of human history or the character of some group of people. I would argue, though, that history is not about making the past into what we want it to be, it is learning about ourselves by examining our past.

Thus, rather than generalizing and oversimplifying the history of Africa to make it easier to squeeze the continent into an already crowded world history, a better strategy would be to embrace the fact that there need be no single meaning or even coherence to the history of Africa. As my colleague Erik Gilbert argues in his own essay for this issue of *World History Connected*, a more accurate picture may well be gained by breaking Africa down into multiple units of analysis. Africanists already do this within their own field, dividing the continent up into geographical, cultural, and thematic regions and recognizing that what is true for one area of study may not be true for another. There is no reason to assume that world history would not also benefit from a similarly textured approach to the continent. Further, this approach would facilitate a more thematic and less geographical approach to world history. Rather than having African material appear as a “patch” in our world history quilt, why not have it be part of the very warp and weave of the fabric – interwoven with other similar threads from distant parts of the world?

Furthermore, the lesson of how African history has been stereotyped can also serve to point up how other regions of the world have received similarly generic attention in world history. The success of Area Studies programs is that they have proven that places like Africa and South America are very much part of the historical world. Their inclusion has been an important step forward for world history.²² However, it is also true that continents nonetheless represent something of “blunt instruments” when it comes to providing tools for historical analysis, even at the macro level of world history. World history needs to move beyond being “inclusive” at the continental level. The field needs to reflect the fact that little if anything in world history is fixed – even the identities and geographical constructions which we use to understand and organize our contemporary world. Just because “Africa” holds real meaning for us today, it does not mean it is a relevant unit of analysis for 500 BCE.

Finally, the examination of Africa in world history highlights the dilemma of attempting to impose fixed units of analysis on a world that has always been ever-changing. Human societies are never static. They grow, shrink, merge, split, move, mutate, and reinvent themselves in a constant process of interaction with one another and with their environment (which itself constantly changes). Thus, it makes much more sense for our units of historical analysis to change along with the human societies that are ultimately the focus of world history. World history is a moving target, and frameworks of study which say “meanwhile, in Africa” every few chapters (or weeks) do little justice to Africa’s place in history. All of this means that history is far more complex than we thought it was. That also means, thankfully, that it can be far more inclusive and far more interesting. Herein lies the great potential of world history. By recognizing the diversity within our existing units of analysis we will be able to undertake a much more comparative and meaningful examination of what we all share in common, and what makes each of our great variety of cultures and societies unique.

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Notes

¹ See the thread “African History” on H-World, accessible via the H-Africa “Notable Threads” at <http://h-net.msu.edu/~africa>.

² The author would like to extend special thanks to Dr. Joe Miller for his efforts in gaining ASA Board sponsorship for these panels.

³ As an example of how the situation represents a change in the status quo, the 1999 release by the American Historical Association entitled *Perspectives on Teaching Innovations: World and Global History*, included essays on integrating the Middle East, the United States, the Caribbean, South America and India into world history, but none on Africa. In fairness, an essay from another part of the collection entitled “The World Outside the West Course Sequence at Stanford University” by Names Lance and Richard Roberts (pp. 37-45) did include mention of the ‘small scale societies’ of Nigeria.

⁴ See, for example, E. Perry Hicks and Barry K. Beyer, “Images of Africa,” *Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 39 (2) (Spring 1970), 158-166; Barbara Wass Van Ausdall, “Images of Africa for American Students,” *The English Journal*, Vol. 77 (5) (September 1988), 37-39; Barbara B. Brown, “Africa: Myth and Reality,” *Social Education* (October 1994), 374-375; and Sheila S. Walker and Jennifer Rasmimanana, “Tarzan in the Classroom: How ‘Educational’ Films Mythologize Africa and Miseducate Americans,” *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 62 (1) (Winter 1993), 3-23.

⁵ I have had the pleasure of teaching not only at large “majority” institutions such as the University of Tennessee (Knoxville), and Northern Kentucky University, but also at Livingstone College, a small “historically black” Liberal Arts college.

⁶ In 1996 Nissan produced an extensive series of commercials for the Pathfinder SUV that were set in East Africa. The Masai really dug the leather trim. In 1998, *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Edition featured a visit to the “ancient tribe” of the Masai in East Africa.

⁷ See the thread “*New York Times' African Reporting*” (18 July-August, 2003) under “Notable Threads” on H-Africa, <http://www.h-net.org/~africa/> .

⁸ A great variety of scholarly and non-scholarly perspectives are often lumped together under the label of “Afrocentrism,” and there is a tendency by some scholars to use the most outlandish variety of Afrocentric perspectives to represent the whole.

⁹ A doff of the hat to Rodney Daniels of the University of Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky University for this telling insight.

¹⁰ As I say to my students, “world history is a constant commission of sins of omission.”

¹¹ This concept provides the Preface to *Africa in World History: From Prehistory to the Present* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003) authored by Dr. Erik Gilbert and myself.

¹² For Africanists, the word “tribe” sets off a whole set of alarms regarding a diverse set of stereotypical African images.

¹³ As with the use of “tribe,” scholars of Africa often break out in hives or develop facial tics when confronted with repeated use of the term “bushmen.”

¹⁴ My favorite porthole for accessing African newspapers is Kiosken. See <http://www.esperanto.se/kiosk/engindex.html>.

¹⁵ The “African Edventure” lives on in the form of a summer Study Abroad program. The current website welcomes visitors with a large image of a woman with decorative lip plate, a practice found almost exclusively in Ethiopia, despite the fact the summer trip in question is destined only for South Africa and Namibia. See <http://blackboard.is.asu.edu/index.html>.

¹⁶ As Jo Sullivan and Barbara Brown of the Boston University African Studies Center Outreach Program have pointed out, representing Africa via the Masai is roughly equivalent to using the Amish as the “typical” Americans. See Barbara B. Brown, “Africa: Myth and Reality” *Social Education* (October 1994). See <http://www.h-net.org/~afriteach/afticles/myth.html>.

¹⁷ For an excellent example of how such questions can be addressed, see Donald Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa: A History of Globalization in Niimi, the Gambia* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004).

¹⁸ The fact that Don Williams is a musical legend in many parts of African can hardly help but rattle student stereotypes. See <http://www.don-williams.com/>.

¹⁹ This was Alf Wannenburg, Peter Johnson, and Anthony Bannister, *The Bushmen* (London: New Holland Publishers, 2000).

²⁰ Leah Tannahill, *Food in History* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995), 279.

²¹ See, for example, Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of a Race from 4500 BC to 2000 AD* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987).

²² See Chapter 8, on “Area Studies,” in Patrick Manning’s excellent *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 145-162.