The Pasts and Futures of African History: A Generational Inventory

This article is based on a paper compiled for the University of South Africa, Department of History, as part of their Sixtieth Anniversary Commemoration Series, presented in Pretoria, 8 Aug. 2006. I thank the participants at the seminar for their comments and input, which helped in the revision of the paper.

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The Pasts and Futures of African History: A Generational Inventory

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One of the advantages of turning fifty, I was told on my fiftieth birthday in 2005, is that you earn the privilege to reminisce and people tend to listen to you a little more attentively, even if they are feigning it. I thought I would take this opportunity to reminisce with you about African history as encountered by students, researchers, and teachers of my generation. As we all know, the past is never entirely about the past, it is always framed through the prism of the present with an eye to the future. Hence, the title of my presentation: the pasts and futures of African history.

In discussing the development of African historiography or any academic field for that matter, it is important to note that the economies and cultures of knowledge production are an integral part of complex and sometimes contradictory, but always changing, institutional, intellectual, ideological and individual dynamics and predilections that unfold at interlocking national and transnational, or local and global levels. The production of disciplinary histories serves to commemorate the founders, socialise newcomers, and establish boundaries and guideposts for the future. I am particularly fond of such histories, partly for institutional reasons as a past academic administrator who was paid to keep track of where African studies were going; also for intellectual reasons, given my fascination with both the history of ideas and the history of knowledge producing institutions; and for personal reasons as an African scholar based in the global North, who communicates with different intellectual communities and negotiates multiple intellectual traditions on both sides of the Atlantic.

1 This article is based on a paper compiled for the University of South Africa, Department of History, as part of their Sixtieth Anniversary Commemoration Series, presented in Pretoria, 8 Aug. 2006. I thank the participants at the seminar for their comments and input, which helped in the revision of the paper.

I begin the discussion with autobiographical sketches as a way of taking disciplinary stock, of reflecting on the long, tortuous journey that the discipline of African history has travelled over the past few decades. I will then look at the institutional dynamics of African historiography – the phases that the field has undergone which reflect the changing fortunes of African universities that are the centres of production, as well as the dissemination and consumption for academic history. This will be followed by an examination of the intellectual dimensions, the ideas, theories, and analytical paradigms in African historiography. Needless to say, the interpretive frameworks or perspectives developed in African historiography over the past half century have been greatly influenced by the prevailing ideological hegemonies and tendencies. I then offer a few thoughts on future directions in the field and conclude with a research agenda for world history.

A BRIEF INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY OF AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

I attended university in my home country, Malawi, in 1972, graduating four years later with a major in History and English. I then spent a year as a teaching assistant before proceeding for an MA degree in African history and international relations in England from 1977-78 and to Canada for my PhD between 1978 and 1982. My trajectory as a student was fairly typical of my generation; many of us did our bachelor’s degrees in Africa’s newly established post-independence universities – the University of Malawi was merely seven years old when I enrolled. Then we found ourselves trekking to Western Europe or North America for our graduate studies, where we were trained in newly established African studies programmes by newly minted Africanist scholars, who belonged to the same cohort as the relatively young and eager lecturers who taught us back home. We differed from the generations immediately before and after us in that those who preceded us were pioneers in the establishment of African history as a respectable academic field and they did most of their training in the 1950s and 1960s in overseas institutions because higher education was still in its infancy during these turbulent years of decolonisation. Those who came after us in the 1980s and 1990s were able to receive their entire education on the continent, but they had to study at universities undergoing the crises of structural adjustment. This is to suggest that as students my generation was educated during the golden years of African universities and African historiography.

In an intriguing comparative analysis of the development of African history at six universities in Africa, Britain, and the United States between the 1950s and 1990s (University of Ghana; the University of Dar es Salaam; the University of Cape Town; the School of Oriental and African Studies in London; Northwestern University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison), Esparanza Brinzuela-Garcia has identified three phases in this development. She calls these the formative years, the golden era,
and the decades of crisis. The formative years, the period from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, were characterised by staffing and curricular challenges as the disciplinary architecture of the field was being laid. There was also the excitement of building a new interdisciplinary field, all underpinned by the rise and eventual triumph of African nationalism. During the golden era from the mid 1960s to the late 1970s, the discipline matured as new universities were founded across Africa and vibrant historiographical schools emerged. African studies programmes grew in the United States and Britain, the range of African history courses expanded, and undergraduate and graduate student enrolments increased rapidly. No sooner had African history become consolidated than the third phase set in, from the 1980s and 1990s. This was a period when the discipline’s institutional standing began eroding due to budgetary constraints linked to the collapse of the welfare state in the global North, the developmentalist state in the global South and the rise of neo-liberalism. African countries and universities were hit particularly hard.

The institutional changes were tied to new ideological and intellectual currents. History and historians increasingly fared less well as the nationalist fervour of the 1950s and 1960s gave way to the developmentalist preoccupations of the 1970s and the deflationary, structural adjustment prescriptions of the 1980s and 1990s. The effect of all this was that African historiography became ideologically and theoretically fragmented. More important, perhaps, is the sad fact that African universities lost their lead in the production of African historical knowledge and became increasingly subordinated to Northern institutions – to their detriment and that of the development of the entire discipline. The research focus also shifted from the \textit{longue duree} of African history to contemporary history – the twentieth century, the colonial and the postcolonial eras.

I can vouch for these trends from my experience as a student and a young lecturer. In my student days, Africanist historians from Western Europe and North America were not taken seriously until they had cut their academic teeth teaching in African universities. And I recall the days when publishing in African historical journals was mandatory for Africanists. For example, no one studying Kenya – to use the country about which I did my PhD research – was taken seriously unless they published in the \textit{Kenyan Historical Review}. The last issue of that journal appeared in 1978 and today there are Kenyanists who hardly go to Kenya, let alone interact with Kenyan historians. On the other hand, in the 1960s and 1970s African graduate students eagerly returned home to take up positions in the expanding universities, assured not only of middle-class comforts and respectability but also eager to write their beloved ethnic groups, nations, and continent into the empirical and theoretical corpus of the disciplines. They aspired to strip the disciplines, including history, of their Eurocentric blinkers and conceits. When I finished

my doctorate in 1982 the idea of working in North America appeared absurd, and so I went to teach in Jamaica for two years and then went on to Kenya for six years. From the 1980s these trends were reversed as African universities went into crisis and became less attractive to Northern Africanists worried about the tightening job markets at home as the old protections of white male employment privilege were eroded by affirmative action that increasingly brought white women and racial minorities to American campuses. At the same time, growing numbers of Africans educated in the global north opted to stay there. One of the few empirical studies on the rates of return of Africans with PhDs who had trained in North America between 1986 and 1996 was conducted by Pires, et al. and shows that variations were engendered by different patterns of economic growth and the state of political stability in specific African countries; the relative size of immigrant populations in the host countries; the nature of sponsorship, the discipline involved and age of the graduate students. The likelihood of return was higher for those in the older age cohorts, and for those in the life sciences compared to those in the humanities, including history.

As for the temporal focus of my generation’s historical research, we were clearly more enamoured by colonial than we were by pre-colonial history. Nationalist historians of the generation of Ade Ajayi, Bethwell Ogot, Adu Boahen and Cheikh Anta Diop were wont to reduce colonialism to an episode, a digression, a footnote that altered African cultures and societies only slightly, and to emphasise continuity in Africa’s long history. They were clearly reacting against an imperialist historiography according to which colonialism marked the beginning of history in Africa. My generation of historians, schooled by the nationalist historians, never doubted the historicity of Africa, but was enraged by the continued dehumanisation of Africans.

Not surprisingly, we focused our intellectual energies on unravelling the structures and processes of oppression and exploitation that engendered this attitude. Capitalism and colonialism became our chief culprits. And so we largely abandoned researching (although we of course taught) the histories of Africa before the European contact and the depredations of Africa’s integration into the world system; the slave trade, colonialism and neocolonialism loomed large in our constructions of African history. The iconic representation of this historiographical tendency was Walter Rodney’s How Europe Underdeveloped Africa. We were critical of both imperialist and nationalist historiographies, but we failed to realise the depth of our intellectual debts to the

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5 Mark Pires, Ron Kassimir and M. Brihane, Investing in Return: Rates of Return of African PhDs Trained in North America (New York, Social Science Research Council, 1999).
6 Walter Rodney, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa (Washington, DC, Howard University Press, 1982)
Eurocentric and Afrocentric paradigms; like the former we were preoccupied with the European intervention and impact, and like the latter, with African agency and adaptations.

INTELLECTUAL TRENDS IN AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

During the past 32 years since I started studying African history seriously – as a student in Malawi, Britain and Canada, and later as a teacher in Jamaica, Kenya, Canada, and for the past 11 years in the United States, I have come to accept that the field can be seen as having traversed four periods in which it has undergone four major trends in terms of the dominant theoretical paradigms. African historiography is of course much older, going back to the very origins of the discipline.

It has been suggested that African historiography has undergone three broad phases, each of which embodied various tendencies. The first is the pre-fifteenth century era dominated by three successive and coexisting traditions: the Christian tradition, as represented by St Augustine the great theologian from present-day Algeria, who articulated perhaps the first philosophy of history in The City of God. He saw history as inevitably universal and meta-historical in that it entails movement towards divine providence. The ecclesiastical histories of Christian Africa extend to Ethiopia, where chronicles such as Kebr̆a Negast (Glory of Kings) were produced proclaiming dynastic glory in a religious idiom.

The second is the Islamic tradition as represented by Ibn Khaldun from present-day Tunisia, who is regarded by many as one of the greatest historians of all time, whose history of the world provided the first serious challenge to providential history. His work postulated a cyclical theory of history; it anticipated modern historical methodology and influenced interpretations of Maghreb history well into the twentieth century. It is to Khaldun that we owe one of the earliest surviving fragments of the history of

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the Mali Empire. Muslim scholars from North Africa and West Africa itself produced numerous works on West African societies, among them the famous Ta’rikh al-Sūdān and Ta’rikh al-Fattāsh, both produced in Timbuctu in the seventeenth century, and the Kano Chronicle and the Gonja Chronicle produced in modern day Ghana in the eighteenth century. In East Africa you have similar chronicles, such as the Kilwa Chronicle. It is no exaggeration to say that comprehension of Arabic and Ajami writings (writing using Arabic script) are fundamental to an understanding of African history and historiography. From this conviction a few years ago I started taking Arabic classes. I haven’t made much progress.

The third is what I call the griot tradition. Griots – known by different names in various societies – were highly trained custodians of oral tradition and narrative. Their recollections sought to link the past and the present, construct collective worldviews and identity, educate the youth, express political views, and provide entertainment and aesthetic pleasure. The production of oral traditions often involved performance based on a participatory ethic. From Thomas Hale’s fascinating history, it is clear griots had many other functions besides being genealogists and historians; they were also advisers to rulers, patrons and other members of society, spokespersons, diplomats, mediators, interpreters and translators, musicians, composers, teachers, exhorters, warriors, witnesses, praise-singers, and ceremony participants during namings, initiation, courtship, marriages, installations and funerals. In West Africa griots first emerged at least a thousand years ago and since then their role has changed.9

Then, during the second period from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, two new historiographical traditions emerged alongside the three identified above, which continued to exist and develop and engaged the new traditions in complicated ways. I call these new traditions the Eurocentric and the vindicationist traditions. Many of the early European writers who visited African coastal regions did not set out to produce historical works as such, although their works were later used as historical sources. But several self-consciously historical works were produced. From the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth, the volume of European travel literature grew rapidly and some of these travel writings sought to incorporate historical accounts. Much of this work was unapologetically Eurocentric, especially as the Atlantic slave trade expanded and the need to justify it grew. Some scholars have stressed that many Portuguese writings, for example, were based on unreliable sources, or were interpreted out of context, or were more interested in literary style and fantasy because renaissance historiography put greater emphasis on telling a story well, in an erudite fashion, and with literary embellishments, than it did on relating the facts or adopting a critical

9 Thomas Hale, Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1998).
approach to sources. Africa was increasingly portrayed as ‘primitive’, and as the drums
of imperialism began beating, its salvation was seen to lie in European overlordship
or outright conquest. Eurocentricism was given philosophical imprimatur in Hegel’s
*Philosophy of History* in which he declared, categorically, that Africa ‘is not a historical
continent; it shows neither change nor development,’ and that the portion that showed
historical light, according to his judgment, namely, North Africa, was not really a part
of this benighted continent. Thus was born the racist truncation of Africa into the sub-
Saharan cartographic contraption. In the meantime, North Africa was encapsulated into
the orientalist paradigm, dissected so brilliantly by Edward Said’s book, *Orientalism*,
the foundational text of postcolonial studies.

In reaction, Western educated scholars in West Africa and the African diaspora, began
producing histories that emphasised African civilisations and achievements. The
vindicationist tradition found a powerful voice in Olaudha Equino’s *The Interesting
Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. Even more scholarly and combative were
the works of the great Liberian scholar, Edward Blyden, whose works, *A Vindication
of the African Race*, and *Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race*, set the tone for much
twentieth-century nationalist and Pan-Africanist thought and historiography. Besides
these large civilisational histories, national histories were also published by West African
intellectuals, such as Samuel Johnson’s influential and classic *History of the Yoruba*.
From the diaspora came the writings of Alexander Crummel and in the early twentieth
century those of W.E.B. Dubois, most memorably his *The World and Africa*, and W.L.
Hansberry who conducted lifelong research on the image of Africa and Africans by
classical Greco-Roman writers. These histories defended the humanity and historicity
of Africans. I recall the electrifying impact some of these works had on me when I first
read them as an undergraduate student.

The third period emerged in the twentieth century and was characterised, in the colonial
and postcolonial academy, by four traditions, what I call the imperialist/Eurocentric
tradition, the nationalist tradition, the radical tradition incorporating Marxist, dependency,

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12 Olaudha Equino, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (New York, Norton,
2001 [1793]).
13 Edward Blyden, *A Vindication of the African Race*, *The Negro in Ancient History*, and *Christianity,
Islam, and the Negro Race* (Monrovia, G. Killian, 1857); Edward Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro
race* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1887).
15 W.E.B. Dubois, *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which Africa has Played in World
16 William Leo Hansberry, *Africa and Africans as Seen by Classical Writers* (Washington,
feminist, and environmental approaches, and the ‘posts’ tradition – postmodernism and postcolonialism. Each of these approaches differed both in their interpretations and methodology, in the type and way they used sources. Imperialist and nationalist historiographies represented almost diametrically opposed views of African history; to the former African history began with the arrival of Europeans, a narrative that turned colonialism into a decisive moment, while to the latter African history stretches for millennia and colonialism is a parenthesis.

Consequently, imperialist historians mostly discussed, in positive light, the policies of colonial governments and the activities of colonial auxiliaries from European merchants to missionaries to the settlers. When Africans appeared in their narratives, it was to condemn their societies and cultures, or to chronicle their Westernisation or modernisation. Those who resisted colonial conquest or colonial rule were depicted as atavistic while those who collaborated or accepted the colonial regime were praised for their foresight and wisdom. In fact, in-depth study of African societies was largely left to anthropology, which with its functionalist-positivist paradigms and ethnographic focus, present exonerated, if not extolled, colonialism. The methodological forte of nationalist historiography lay in its discovery of new sources of data. Oral tradition, historical linguistics, evidence from the natural sciences, and historical anthropology joined written and archaeological sources so prized by Eurocentric historiography as valid sources for historical research and reconstruction.

While imperialist historiography ignored North Africa as a part of African history, it found an auspicious home in apartheid South Africa. The English-Afrikaner tensions among the ruling white minority found expression in the historiographical divide between largely liberal English historians and nationalist Afrikaner historians. From the 1920s when liberal historiography became dominant in the English-speaking universities, the country was seen through the prism of race and culture, and its history was interpreted as a series of racial and cultural interactions between the Afrikaners, Africans, and the British in the context of a changing and modernising economy. In this historiography, Afrikaners became the eternal villains behind the development of apartheid, while the English were portrayed as enlightened, ignoring the role of British capital in the construction of South Africa’s racial capitalism. Africans, for their part, appeared generally innocent, or were portrayed with undisguised paternalism, their Herculean struggles against settler colonialism left unacknowledged. In the meantime, nationalist Afrikaner historians concentrated on chronicling the travails and triumphs of the Afrikaner nation, pitted against the imperialist English and ‘primitive’ Africans.

But the production of historical knowledge was not an imperial monopoly even in the darkest days of colonialism. This is because colonialism and its various projects were always contested. The perennial struggles over the organisations of the colonial economy, politics, and culture created spaces for the production of anti-imperialist historical knowledge by the ‘traditional’ historians, Western-educated historians, and Islamic historians. In short, the griots did not die, nor did the Islamic schools and scholars disappear, and the children who went to the colonial schools later turned into anti-colonial historians. There were also colonial critics in the imperial metropoles themselves. The relationships between these groups were complex and contradictory and varied from place to place and changed over time. Their methods, audiences, and objectives also differed in some cases and overlapped in others.

Independence created favourable conditions for the production of nationalist historiography. As national universities were established, research funds became available, historical associations were formed, journals launched, and publishers scrambled for the latest research findings. Famous schools emerged, most prominently the Ibadan school, which denounced the shortcomings of missionaries and colonial governments and launched an influential series, and the Dar es Salaam school, which popularised dependency approaches. Nationalist historians chronicled the rise and fall of Africa’s ancient states and empires, long-distance trade, migrations and the spread of religions. They critiqued colonial policies, celebrated the growth of nationalism, and reincorporated Egypt and North Africa into the mainstream of African history. They gave the fragile new states historical identity and a legitimising ideology.

The nationalist perspective influenced historical writing in Europe and North America, where oral and other sources were increasingly used. African history itself was incorporated into university history syllabuses, and specialised African studies centres mushroomed, beginning with a lectureship in African history at SOAS in 1948 and the establishment in 1962 of the Journal of African History, developments that were replicated across western Europe, the former Soviet Union and its client states in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in the United States where African studies and history, long confined to the historically black colleges and universities, finally entered the segregated corridors of the historically white universities, beginning with Northwestern where a programme in African studies was established in 1948, as part of national security concerns. Before long, African studies, as chronicled in Zeleza’s two-volume study, The Study of Africa, had spread to Canada, the Caribbean, and Asia.¹⁸

From the 1970s, the nationalist school began to face challenges. Critics charged that nationalist historiography focused on the ‘voices’ of the ruling classes, rather than the

¹⁸ Zeleza, The Study of Africa.
‘masses.’ It was also pointed out that nationalist historiography was too preoccupied with showing that Africa had produced organised polities, monarchies, and cities, just like Europe, so that it wrote African history by analogy and subsumed it to European history, and failed to probe deeper into the historical realities of African material and social life before colonial rule. As for the colonial period, nationalism was made so ‘over-determining’ that only feeble efforts were made to provide systematic analyses of imperialism, its changing forms, and their impact, not to mention the processes of local class formation and class struggle. These critiques were widespread by the time I entered graduate school and we took enormous pride in attacking nationalist historiography.

It was in this context that Marxism became increasingly popular as a paradigm of social science research and under this influence I wrote my thesis on ‘Dependent Capitalism and the Making of the Kenyan Working Class During the Colonial Period’ a title that wears its influences loudly. Marxist influence grew with the triumph of radical liberation movements in the early 1970s, and the adoption of Marxism as a developmentalist ideology by several African political parties and states, and by Western intellectuals who were dissatisfied with bourgeois liberalism and Western imperialism in the Third World. The Marxist historians examined the processes of production, social formation, and class struggle, as well as the complex mediations and contradictory effects of imperialism in modern Africa.

Marxist historiography, broadly defined, came in different theoretical and national configurations. There were many marxisms and marxists, some of the labels worn by choice others by association, either in self-congratulation or derision. Some of the Marxist-inspired work was schematic, doctrinaire, and pretentious. Theoretically ambitious scholars tried desperately to fit Africa into linear Marxist modes of production, and when that did not work, to invent their own tropicalised modes, or saw the encounter between Africa and Europe as an articulation of modes of production. But some of the work was rich and enlightening. Particularly impressive were the studies on labour and workers, agriculture and peasants, and the changing structures of Africa’s incorporation into the world economy.

Hardcore Marxists often did not regard dependency theorists as fellow travellers, indeed, there was much theoretical and ideological bloodletting between the two, but they shared more affinities than differences in their emphasis on exploitative economic structures and processes. The Marxists preferred to concentrate on the internal dynamics of African societies, while the dependency theorists were more interested in the external dynamics. Many of course combined both, as I tried to do. Before long, radical historiography

19 Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, ‘Dependent Capitalism and the Making of the Kenyan Working Class During the Colonial Period’ (PhD thesis, Dalhousie University, 1982).
broke into the settler laagers of southern Africa, and a new breed of radical historians began to challenge liberal historiography. They began to demystify the Portuguese myth of lusotropicalism and racial tolerance and to map out the growth of the South’s racial capitalism, although some seemed more inclined to emphasise class than race.

Despite some of the fine work the various approaches inspired, there was one glaring omission: their coverage of gender and women’s history was poor. The underrepresentation of women could be found in virtually all the major historical texts written up to the 1980s as I have chronicled in a survey of dozens of continental, regional, national, and thematic histories. From the turn of the 1970s feminist historians began to challenge women’s marginalisation in African historiography, a challenge buoyed by the growth of the women’s movement. Some African feminists relentlessly attacked the epistemological hegemony of Western feminism, criticising the very foundational categories of Western feminist scholarship such as ‘gender’, ‘woman’ and the ‘body’, arguing that these categories must be subjected to critical analysis and the need to privilege the categories and interpretations of African societies. Perhaps the most famous interventions were those made by Ifi Amadiume and Oyeronke Oyewumi whose books *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* and *The Invention of Women: Making African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, respectively, soon achieved canonical, if highly controversial, status.

From the 1980s there was an explosion of feminist-inspired histories, many of which simply sought to restore women to history, to record women’s activities and experiences in the conventional themes of African historiography, and some to engender African historiography as a whole. The early feminist histories focused mainly on women leaders; the impact of religion on women; and the role of women as slaves, peasants, and traders; the changing forms of marriage and kinship; and the constructions of gender and sex roles. Some of this work concentrated on the precolonial era, but much was on the twentieth century in which the impact of colonialism featured prominently. They examined how different groups of women were affected by the imposition of colonial rule and by the combination of colonial and indigenous patriarchal ideologies. The topic that attracted by far the most attention is that of women’s resistance to colonialism and women’s participation in nationalist struggles. For the postcolonial period, much of the research was conducted within the women-in-development paradigm, which later gave way to women-and-development, and gender-and-development. I jumped on the

22 Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1997).
bandwagon with a book on women in the Kenyan labour movement, recasting my neo-

More recent studies have focused on issues of sexuality, constructions of gender identities, and colonial representations.\footnote{See, for example, the following influential texts, Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, Sexuality and the Colonial Contest (New York, Routledge, 1995); and Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds, Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1997).} According to Zine Magubane, African sexuality and its control and representations were central to ideologies of colonial domination.\footnote{Zine Magubane, ‘Sex and Sexuality’, in Zeleza and Eyoh, Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century African History, 481–4.}

In colonial discourse female bodies symbolised Africa as the conquered land, and the alleged hyper-fecundity and sexual profligacy of African men and women made Africa an object of colonial desire and derision, a wild space of pornographic pleasures in need of sexual policing. Sexuality was implicated in all forms of colonial rule as an intimate encounter that could be used simultaneously to maintain and erode racial difference, and as a process essential for the reproduction of human labour power for the colonial economy, both of which demanded close surveillance and control, especially that of African female sexuality. Feminist studies on the construction of gender identities and relations have helped spawn a growing literature on the creation and transformation of colonial and postcolonial masculinities, which look at how masculinities were produced and performed in different institutional contexts – from the state, the church and school, to the workplace and the home – each with its own gender regime and power relations, and in different locations, both rural and urban.\footnote{See for example, Lisa A. Lindsay and Stephan F. Miescher, eds, Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa (Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Heinemann, 2003); and Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell, eds, African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).}

For its part, environmental history began to reshape the way various periods and phenomena in African history were understood as dynamic processes involving the complex interactions between humans and habitat, nature and society, history and geography; how the physical environment and human agency are mutually constitutive; that people’s creativity and thought produce places as much as places produce people’s cultures and identities, and of the deep effects of ideologies of power on the landscape and vice-versa. Several environmental approaches can be identified.\footnote{For succinct summaries of African environmental historiography, see William Beinart, ‘African History and Environmental History’, African Affairs, 99 (2000), 269–302; and William Y. Osei, ‘Environmental Change’, in Zeleza and Eyoh, Encyclopaedia of Twentieth Century African History, 188–194. For two influential early texts, see David Anderson and Richard Grove, eds, Conservation in Africa: People, Policies and Practice (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987) and Helge Kjekshus, Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History (London, Heinemann, 1977).}
‘merrie’ Africa and apocalyptic perspectives in which the nationalist and imperialist historians battled it out. To the former, Africa before the colonial fall was a tropical Garden of Eden and they blamed the colonial intervention for undermining age-old and sound environmental management capacities. The latter celebrate the beneficial impact of European environmental knowledge, management, and policies upon the allegedly environmentally unsound African agrarian and pastoral practices.

Influenced by postcolonial ideas many environmental historians increasingly stressed the complexity and contradictions of environmental change. They looked, too, at the variability of outcomes that environmental transformations generated during different historical moments, including colonialism. These transformations were both negative and positive and were simultaneously products of creative and failed adaptations. Interrelated work has dwelt on African environmental ideas, ideologies, movements, and conflicts.\textsuperscript{28} Included are the studies by environmental feminists, who seek to decipher the gendered perceptions and constructions of environmental changes and adaptations. Many of the newer perspectives have not been initiated by historians and some are quite suspicious of them, but the days of environmental blindness and binaries are now happily past.

The 1980s and 1990s also saw the rise of the fourth set of approaches and paradigms inspired by the rise of the ‘posts’, approaches which shared a distrust of the ‘metanarratives’ of nation, class, and sometimes gender, and the positivism and dichotomies of modernist history. They insisted on the hybridity, contingency, decenteredness, ambivalence, and the centrality of discourse in historical experience. History and historians have had a complex and problematic relationship with the ‘posts,’ one characterised by advocacy, ambivalence and antagonism. To many African and Africanist historians the claims of the ‘posts’ often sound both familiar and strange – familiar, because they have spent their entire careers deconstructing Western and modernist claims to truth, and to chronicling the clashes and convergences of cultures and the loss of certainties; but also strange, because many of them believe passionately, bred as they were with the enduring dreams of African nationalism – self-determination, development, and democratisation – in the necessity of progress and in the possibilities of historical agency.\textsuperscript{29}


To the antagonists the ‘posts’ were dismissed as the latest in a long line of disempowering theories and discourses, coming at a time when Africans who had long been silenced had begun to act as the subjects rather than objects of history. They were suspicious of the globalist ambitions of ‘post’ theorising and cultural critique, and its deflationary discourse of Africa that seemed to glibly dismiss African difference and world-significance by trying to absorb it into the West’s self-indulgent modernity with what Kwaku Korang calls its monocentricism, monolingualism, monologism, and monovision.\(^{30}\) On the other hand, the accommodationists with their cosmopolitan internationalism sought to Africanise the ‘posts’, to find an African habitation for them, based on the conviction that Africa is inescapably immersed in the West’s material and cultural economy and assimilated into its cognitive and discursive hegemony, thanks to the imperial-colonial intervention. Some historians in post-apartheid South Africa and in Francophone Africa seized on the ‘posts’ with alacrity, either as gestures of intimate familiarity with Western intellectual fads, or for refuge from dealing with the structural deformities of the postcolonies and post-apartheid South Africa.

Korang advocates Kwame Appiah’s more nuanced posture, that the ‘posts’ ought to facilitate both Africa’s interrogation of the world and its interrogation by the world; not the difference of the exceptionalism of the nationalists, but the difference of the same – that Africa is an integral part of modern, transnational culture, that Africa and the West have mutually constituted each other.\(^{31}\) Appiah seeks to rehabilitate an ethical universal, a modernist humanism that is negotiated between world cultures that are contaminated and inscribed with each other. The power of the ‘posts’ lies in the extent to which they are able to promote such a project, to bring together the Africa-for-the-world and the Africa-for-itself. To achieve this requires that the accommodationist position, Korang insists, be vigilantly self-aware, protected by the armour of a healthy rejectionism.

I tried to understand the ‘posts’ and other new paradigms such as globalisation by writing a series of papers and a book – which left me more confused than ever. It would seem to me that beneath all the theoretical babble the impact of the ‘posts’ on historiography has been more in terms of theoretical intent than in actual practice. This is largely because the institutional constraints, demands, imperatives, procedures and practices of historiographical production – teaching, training, research, publishing, and employment – remain wedded to the Rankean method. The ‘posts’ may have discredited teleologies, but that does not entail the meaninglessness of history, or that historical change and movement are fictional.

I have tempered my old antagonism to the ‘posts’, because I have come to appreciate how congenial they have proved to feminist and ethnic studies, encouraged the study


of historically despised or marginalised groups, the examination of how identities are constructed and constituted, exploration of how situations and events are understood and represented, and their emphasis on the importance of language and literary sensibility for historical writing; but to be sure, historians were not blissfully unaware of these things before. Indeed, since the nineteenth century when the discipline emerged in its current form, new methodologies, topics, and approaches have continuously arisen and have been incorporated into the historiography. This shows the strength, not the infirmity of history.\textsuperscript{32}

**TOWARDS A NEW GLOBAL HISTORY OF AFRICA AND HUMANITY**

The immense achievement of African historiography over the past half-century is not in doubt. The apotheosis of the African historiographical revolution was the publication of two rival compendiums, each in eight volumes, namely, the *UNESCO General History of Africa* and the *Cambridge History of Africa*.\textsuperscript{33} Jan Vansina calls the UNESCO project ‘a unique venture in twentieth-century historiography’. It is, he continues, ‘the most impressive venture of this century, not only because of its size or complexity, but because it involved authors from the most diverse origins belonging to all the schools of thought then active in international academic circles’.\textsuperscript{34} The *General History* brought together the largest group of historians ever assembled to work on a research project, and besides the volumes themselves, it generated numerous symposia and the publication of invaluable archival guides, which will have a lasting impact on African historiography. The project was born out of Pan-Africanism, for it was at the founding meeting of the Organisation of African Unity that UNESCO was asked to undertake the project, which was launched in 1965 and completed in 1993.

Nevertheless, African historiography has yet to rid itself entirely of the epistemic erasures, omissions, fabrications, stereotypes and silences of imperialist historiography.\textsuperscript{35} The struggle to liberate African history will have to continue resting on a double intellectual


manoeuvre: provincialising Europe that has monopolised universality and universalising Africa beyond its Eurocentric provincialisation. This requires not only continued vigilance against Eurocentric conceptions of history and categories of analysis, but also vigorous reconstructions of history that re-centre centre African history by deepening and globalising it in its temporal and spatial scope. It is a mark of the marginal position African history still occupies in the circles of Eurocentric scholarship that in a recent survey of world historiography by Daniel Woolf, Africa is short-shrifted in two and half pages out of more than 50 pages in which the ‘Western tradition’ occupies centre stage. The ‘African Past’, as it is sub-titled, appears belatedly under the last rubric in the chapter, ‘Twentieth Century Developments and New Paths’, a section duly opened with reference to the notorious dismissals of African history made by F.W. Hegel and his British intellectual descendant, Hugh Trevor Roper.36

This survey demonstrates quite powerfully the propensity to cast Europe, conveniently camouflaged from time to time by that imagined signifier of appropriation – the West – as the central player in global history and to reduce other world regions to minor players in the human drama. Not surprisingly, we are offered another truncated Africa, the Africa of what V.Y. Mudimbe famously called the ‘colonial library,’ the Africa of Western derision, a caricature constructed by European epistemic fantasies and so deeply entrenched in Europe’s social imaginary of its ultimate and most intimate ‘Other’ 37 African intellectual historians must reclaim Africa’s historiography that is scattered in various libraries, especially in the ‘ancient library’ and the ‘Islamic library,’ and they must vigorously decolonise the ‘colonial library’ and challenge its linear and narcissistic narratives by pointing out the contributions of thinkers and writers of African descent, from the theologians of early Christianity such as St Augustine to the theoreticians of American modernity, such as W.E.B. Dubois, who are often appropriated into an ever rising and everlasting Western civilization.

No amount of historiographical conceit can hide the fact that Europe has not always been the dominant part of the world, or Europeans the most numerous members of the human species. The rise of Europe to global dominance is fairly recent. Until the mid-eighteenth century the Muslim world was dominant in much of the Afro-Eurasian world. And in recent times global power has been shifting gradually from Euroamerica to Asia, led by Japan, China, and India. But power alone cannot be the measure of history in all its complexities and ramifications; to equate history to power is to write impoverished histories of victors of war and genocide, colonialism and imperialism;

histories of those whose glories have exacted heavy ethical costs for the value of human life and high entropic costs for the viability of the planet itself.

This is to suggest that African historians must take seriously the challenge of placing African history into world history. The field of world history has grown rapidly in the last few decades, but African historians are poorly represented. Until more African historians are engaged in researching, writing, and teaching world history, Africa will continue to be treated as a peripheral part of human history and world history will necessarily remain incomplete, deprived of Africa’s vantage point as one of the central players in the human drama. World or global history, which comes in all manner of transcontinental, transregional, transnational and comparative configurations, helps bring into question the construction and utility of conceptual categories used in Western historiography that are often applied uncritically to the histories of Africa and Asia.38 The popularity of world history has been influenced quite considerably by the emergence of globalisation studies and diaspora studies.

Diaspora studies offer African historians a key avenue to globalise African history and contest European appropriations of global history. African diaspora studies have been studied from three vantage points: the slave trade, the Black Atlantic, and the globalisation paradigms. Studies of the slave trade have focused on its causes, courses, and consequences. Historiographical dispute has centred on the trade’s demographic and economic impact on both Africa and Euroamerica. Joseph Inikori has advanced the work begun by Eric Williams and Walter Rodney against Eurocentric apologists of the slave trade, to demonstrate convincingly in his award-winning book, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England*, that international trade based on the Atlantic slave system was pivotal to the world’s first industrial revolution in England between 1650 and 1850.39

Gilroy’s Black Atlantic paradigm suffers from its disdainful excision of Africa as the silent presence in the formation of Atlantic cultures, and the primacy it gives to the Anglophone diasporas, ignoring the much larger Spanish and Portuguese-speaking diasporas.40 Nevertheless, when the book was first published in 1993 it opened new analytical possibilities that recast old conceptions of the Atlantic world as something

38 Jerry H. Bentley, ‘Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History’, *Journal of World History*, 16, 1 (2005), 51–82, sees ‘ecumenical world history’ as a way of transcending the ideologically driven totalising and teleological histories of both the right and the left.


of Eurogenic creation. The studies that have been produced since then, focusing on the emergence and development of an integrated, if unequal Atlantic world, have helped to restore the African and African diasporic contributions to the construction of the Americas, modern Europe, and Africa itself to their rightful place. It is important to remember that until the mid-nineteenth century the majority of people migrating from the so-called Old World to the New World were Africans and not Europeans. As Sheila Walker puts it, ‘the demographic foundation of the Americas was African, not European. … In the necessary process of recreating themselves in their new milieu, these Diasporan Africans invented and participated in the inventing of new cultural forms such as languages, religions, foods, aesthetic expressions, and political and social organisations’.

It was partly because of a growing conviction of the importance of African diaspora studies to Africa’s global historical presence that I embarked on a project on the history of Africa and its diasporas. The project seeks to map out the dispersal of African peoples in all the major world regions – Asia, Europe, and the Americas – to compare the processes of diaspora formation within and among these regions, and to examine the ebbs and flows of linkages – demographic; cultural (including religion and music); economic; political and ideological; intellectual and educational; artistic and iconographic – between these diasporas and Africa over time. The sheer volume of literature on the subject has been a source of inestimable intellectual pleasure and some trepidation for me. I spent six weeks in June and July 2006 on field visits to Venezuela and Brazil; these were the first of a projected three years of visits to all the major African diaspora centres across the globe.

A project such as this has immense intellectual and policy relevance. It can help deepen our understanding of the complex histories and constructions of African diasporas and their equally complex, sometimes contradictory and always changing engagements with Africa. This is especially critical at the present juncture as the African Union and other continental agencies, as well as national governments, seek to build more productive relationships between themselves and their diasporas. Also, as global African migrations increase the challenges of integrating new African diasporas in the host countries, as

42 For an outline of the project, which is funded by a $200,000 grant from the Ford Foundation, see Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, ‘Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic’, African Affairs, 104, 1 (2005), 35–68.
43 In 2004 and 2006 the African Union organised two important conferences to discuss relations between Africa and its diasporas, called the Conference of Intellectuals from Africa and the Diaspora (CIAD I and CIAD II); CIAD I was held in Dakar, Senegal and CIAD II in Salvador, Brazil. The proceedings of the two conferences can be found at http://www.ocpa.irmo.hr/resources/docs/Intellectuals_Dakar_Report-en.pdf (CIAD I), and http://www.africandiasporstudies.com/downloads/alica_CIAD_Ill_article.pdf (CIAD II).
has been seen across Europe (for example in the uprising in France in 2005), so too do they pose challenges of integrating them into the communities with long-established historic African diasporas, as is evident in the Americas (especially the United States). Thus, diaspora studies enable us to insert Africa into global history and rewrite the histories of the various regions to which Africans were dispersed whether voluntarily or by force. The Africans who went to Portugal and Spain during the Andalusian period did so voluntarily, while those who were shipped to the Americas during the era of the Atlantic slave trade were coerced. Both left an indelible mark on the history of Europe, Africa, and the Americas, one whose effects are still with us and are central to understanding the history of Euroamerica – the whitened West.

If we carried the idea of African migrations to its logical conclusion, Africa’s centrality in world history, in the history of humanity, becomes even more obvious. As Colin Palmer has noted, there are at least six waves of migrations from Africa, three that occurred in what historians call prehistoric times (beginning with the great exodus that began about 100 000 years ago from the continent to other continents), and three in historic times, including those associated with the Indian Ocean trading system with Asia, the Atlantic slave trade to the Americas, and the contemporary movement of Africans and peoples of African descent to various parts of the globe.

Conventional history covers only the last 5 000 years, a mere flash in the span of human evolution and existence on this planet. It is now abundantly clear that Africa is the original homeland of our species, *homo sapiens*, from where the world’s populations scattered across the globe. It was archaeology that first suggested the out of Africa thesis, the genome project has provided conclusive genetic evidence of our commonality, that humans worldwide share 99.9 per cent of their genetic blueprint and that there are, for the 0.1 per cent difference, larger genetic differences among Africans than between Africans and Eurasians. Two clear conclusions can be drawn from these studies. First,}


it is now certain that the notion of biological races is a myth, albeit a dangerous one that has wrought incalculable damage on human beings, not least for people called ‘Africans’. And second, that Africa is at the heart of human history, the continent where humans have lived longest, where they underwent and made many of the fundamental transformations and innovations that characterise modern humans and social life.

Convinced that it is essential to understand the emergence and development of human history from the inception of modern humans to the present, some scholars have established the field known as bio-history. While conceding that historians’ wariness with biology can partly be attributed to the sad legacies of social Darwinism and the misguided determinisms of socio-biology and evolutionary psychology, Robert McElvane vouches for bio-history, insisting that it is different in that it:

seeks to illuminate aspects of history through a better understanding of human nature – the fundamental traits and predispositions that all humans share and that make us alike . . . Bio-history, moreover, does not see human history as a Darwinian struggle. Instead, it contends that history consists, to a considerable extent, of the interplay between humans’ biological inheritance and the social environments in which the creatures with that inheritance have lived over the past 10 000 years or so.48

Long conceptions of human history offer African historians an immense opportunity to re-centre Africa in global history and deepen our understanding of African history itself. It is indeed a failure of historical imagination to concentrate on the last 5 000 years of recorded history, let alone subsume world history to the trajectory of European history since the rise of European global hegemony two and half centuries ago. The difficulties of reconstructing human history since the emergence of modern humans are immense. Traditional historical methods based on written and oral sources are of little use for they do not exist beyond that time span. Archaeology is invaluable and the low levels of investment in archaeological work in Africa should be of great concern. Also critical are the fields of palaeontology, evolutionary biology, ecology, epidemiology, anthropology, and historical linguistics. Few historians possess literacy in these disciplines, but their benefits cannot be in doubt.

A fascinating example of a long-term history of Africa that recasts Africa’s place in world history can be seen in Christopher Ehret’s *The Civilizations of Africa: A History to 1800*, which I use to teach ancient African history to a first year class.49 The book covers the period from 16 000 BCE to 1 800, broken into distinct periods. It takes long-term African history seriously and offers a bold reinterpretation of its periodisation and the development of four civilisational clusters in Africa, which allows the author to discuss Africa as a whole without making untenable generalisations or resorting to racialised narratives. Ehret places Africa at the heart of the human story, examines Africa’s contribution to developments of global importance from food production and religion

to metallurgy and commerce, and the complex connections between the continent and Eurasia and the Americas.

Another Africanist historian, Patrick Manning, has vigorously sought to bring insights from African history into world history, to break the boundaries of regional and thematically parochial histories, and to explore the problem and patterns of interaction in world history. Writing world history has tended to involve identifying and analysing historical phenomena on a worldwide scale, that is, interactions between people organised in, or more often seen by historians as belonging to bounded cultures, civilisations, and continents. Many of the difficulties faced by world historians have centred on the conceptual difficulties of defining what constitutes the ‘world’ and ‘interaction.’ The ‘world’ of most world or global histories – some distinguish between the two – remains trapped in the myopia of Eurocentric historiography, and the ‘interactions’ tend to be confined to a few variables (usually long-distance commerce, mass migration, and empire building), the activities of a few agents, limited periods, and to a few geographical zones. Manning favours a broader and, in my view, more compelling vision of world history, one that encompasses exchanges of a wider range of material and expressive cultures and social and political institutions; focuses on ‘different groupings of human agents for different types of linkages among societies’; considers ‘the changing character of cross-cultural interaction from period to period’, both in terms of the ‘character of the interaction as well as changes in the results of interaction’, and transcends evolutionary stages constructed on analysis restricted to the Afro-Eurasian land mass, or a few zones within it, by including ‘the Americas and the Pacific before 1500’. In his Navigating World History, Manning offers an ambitious and persuasive guidebook on how to produce more expansive world history. He stresses the need for interdisciplinarity and literacy in the humanities, natural, behavioural and social sciences, for innovative research methods and analytical paradigms, and for a deep appreciation of the complex and changing connections within the global human community.

In many ways these studies echo the findings and preoccupations evident in the UNESCO General History of Africa, the supreme compendium of historical knowledge produced by the generation of nationalist historians. They are all part of the arduous task of rescuing both African history and world history from the burdens and blindfolds of Eurocentric historiography. This project, begun by the nationalist historians, needs to continue even as we discard some of their outdated questions and answers, enriched by new historical sources, methods, and theories that have emerged over the last three decades or so. The challenge now, as I see it, is to re-centre African history by deepening and globalising it in its temporal scope and spatial scale, taking the place of Africa in human history seriously. That is perhaps the primary contribution my generation of historians can make and pass on to the generation that is coming of age and the next

generation currently being trained. Africa has always been central, and will remain so, to its peoples and to humanity as a whole, whose cradle this ancient continent is, and where much of its history on this remarkable planet resides.

I feel our work, my generation’s historiographical work, has only just begun, and that I find intellectually exhilarating and invigorating. Perhaps it is the delusion of age, but I was also told when I turned fifty that at that age one has a right to occasional delusions.

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