Introduction: Africa’s Role in World History

Africa’s contentious role in world history has varied with the perspectives of those writing it; the Eurocentric views place Africa in a minor, isolated role, while the Afrocentric view credits black civilization in Egypt with many cultural advances. African studies since the 1950s have provided new insight to the history of the continent, often stressing its interrelatedness to other continents and regions.

Africa has played a number of often contradictory roles in the writing of world history. Indeed, perhaps no single world region has played so contentious a role in the field. Africa has been derided by some scholars as irrelevant to world history. Conversely, others have argued that Africa lies at the very center of human history. The latter perspective is largely attributable to the widespread recognition in paleoanthropology that, based on archeological and anthropological evidence, such as fossil finds in the Awash Valley in Ethiopia, the human species originated in Africa and migrated from there to the rest of the world. What could possibly account for such utterly incompatible perspectives? The answer to the question is itself historical. Over the past several hundred years, the history of Africa has been viewed through a variety of lenses, and these lenses have greatly influenced the way the history of Africa has been understood. Similarly, as the range of academic thinking has expanded and diversified in recent years, so have the number of lenses for understanding Africa. Rather than seeing the various contradictory notions of Africa as a failing of history, however, it might be more useful to look at the situation as instructive. By examining the great variety of ways in which Africa has been understood in the past few hundred years, we gain a remarkable insight into not only the complex part of the world known as Africa, but also into the growth and development of the field of world history itself.

Origins of the Name Africa

The very origin of the name Africa is contentious. The most common scholarly explanation is that it comes from the Roman Africa terra, or “land of the Afri” in reference to a Berber-speaking society that once lived in what is now Tunisia. One alternative explanation is that it comes from the Latin aprica (sunny) or the Phoenician term afar (dust). An Arabic term, Ifriqiya, is often assumed to come from the Roman, though some argue that the Latin term came from the Arabic. There is also an Afrocentric argument that the term is actually ancient Egyptian in origin, from Af-Rui-Ka, meaning “place of beginnings.” Whatever the origins of the term, by the fifteenth century Africa was winning out against competing terms such as Ethiopia and Libya to become the common identifier for the continent. Looking at maps of Africa produced during the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, Africa increasingly comes to dominate as the name of the continent. The controversy over the landmass’s name foreshadows the deeper conflicts over its meaning and relevance in world history.

Early Conceptions of Africa

The field of history as we know it today is largely a Western creation. It should be no surprise, then, that the earliest attempts at writing histories of the world are themselves European. Particularly during
African nationalism is meaningless, dangerous, anachronistic, if it is not, at the same time, pan-Africanism. • Julius K. Nyerere (1922–1999)

Racial and Civilizational Views of Africa

In their efforts to place Africa in world history, most Enlightenment historians were deeply influenced by two issues. First, they tended to think of historical evidence only in terms of written documents. Thus, because they were either unable to translate (as in the case of ancient Egyptian, until the deciphering of the Rosetta Stone in the early nineteenth century) or unaware of written documents of African origin, these scholars decided that Africans were without history. Second, and perhaps more importantly, they were deeply influenced by growing notions of European racial superiority. Born of the achievements of the scientific revolution and the creation of a new plantation economy that demanded a brutal system of slave labor, most European scholars of the time embraced the notion that nonwhite peoples were intrinsically inferior. Witness the following excerpt from David Hume’s essay “Of National Characters” (1748):

I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences.
* Western Sahara has been administered by Morocco since it was partially annexed in 1976. Morocco fully annexed Western Sahara in 1979.

** After a referendum held in January 2011, Sudan is due to split into Sudan and Southern Sudan on 11 July, 2011 (although the official name of the latter is under consideration as of this printing).
G. W. F. Hegel’s “Geographical Basis of World History” (1820s) reflected similar themes. Hegel divided Africa up into three regions: North Africa, Egypt, and “Africa proper.” Hegel describes the region thus:

*Africa proper* is the characteristic part of the whole continent as such . . . It has no historical interest of its own, for we find its inhabitants living in barbarism and savagery in a land which has not furnished them with any integral ingredient of culture. From the earliest historical times, Africa has remained cut off from all contacts with the rest of the world; it is the land of gold, forever pressing in upon itself, and the land of childhood, removed from the light of self-conscious history and wrapped in the dark mantle of night.

Hegel’s characterization of Africa in world history includes several key elements that continued to be used to define Africa (and Africans) in world history for more than a hundred years. First is the racial division of Africa. North Africa and Egypt, where people were “less black,” were judged to possess history, while black Africans were devalued as uncivilized, living in barbarism, and devoid of culture. Second, “Africa proper” was described as being isolated from other parts of the world and thus peripheral to world history. Third, Africans were defined as childlike—not fully mature (as opposed to Europeans). Such a characterization was a critical element in the paternalistic justification of European authority, first in the context of slavery and later in the imposition of colonial rule.

During the course of the early twentieth century, a somewhat different twist on the racial model of world history became prominent, and this was the notion of civilizations. Historians of this era, such as H. G. Wells, Arnold Toynbee, and James Breasted, built their
analysis and presentation of world history around the presumed racial and cultural continuity of certain civilizations. Not surprisingly, these scholars placed European civilization at the pinnacle of a human hierarchy, with other civilizations, such as Chinese or Persian, playing at best supporting roles. Like the Enlightenment historians before them, these scholars left Africa out of the picture, owing both to Africa's presumed uncivilized nature and the absence of historical documentation. In the 1937 edition of his *The Conquest of Civilization* Breasted (1937, 44–45) dismissed Africa as separated from the “Great White Race” by the Sahara and therefore uninfluenced by civilization:

On the south of the Northwest Quadrant lay the teeming black world of Africa, as it does today. It was separated from the white race by the broad stretch of the Sahara Desert. Sometimes the blacks of inner Africa did wander along [the Nile] into Egypt, but they only came in small groups. Thus cut off by the desert barrier and living by themselves, they remained uninfluenced by civilization by the north, nor did they contribute appreciably to this civilization.

Thus the civilizational model did not so much displace race as a means of defining world history as incorporate it into a larger framework. Race and civilization came to mean much the same thing, and, as before, Africa and Africans played a role in world history only as the uncivilized foil to Europe’s achievement and sophistication.

Early Twentieth-Century Black Scholarship

The twentieth century, however, witnessed a number of challenges to the concepts of whiteness and civilization that had been constructed by earlier world historians. The first of these challenges came from a group of African-American scholars that included such pioneers as Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. Du Bois. Both held PhDs from Harvard University and published extensively on black history. Woodson, for example, helped found the *Journal of Negro History*. Du Bois, one of the most prolific writers of the age, directly challenged the notion of Western cultural primacy with such essays as “What is Civilization” (1926). Both scholars did much to undermine the notion that Africans were without history.

Also of early significance was the Senegalese scientist and historian Cheikh Anta Diop, whose doctoral dissertation at the Sorbonne created a sensation in the 1950s by arguing that the ancient Egyptians had been black, rather than white. Diop’s work became a foundational element of the Afrocentric perspective on Africa, which argues that there was a coherent black civilization that had its roots in ancient Egypt. Afrocentrism has increasingly come to represent a counterpoint to Eurocentrism. Indeed, other Afrocentric scholars, such as George James, have even carried the argument further, making the case in *Stolen Legacy* (1954) that ancient Greek culture, rather than being a local innovation, was stolen from Egyptian culture. The argument over the relationship (or lack
thereof) between Greece and Egypt continues to be a contentious one to this day. Witness, for example, the extensive debate between Martin Bernal (author of *Black Athena*) and Mary Lefkowitz (author of *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History*). Notably, while the Afrocentric perspective has helped to undermine notions of white superiority, it has not made a break with, but rather has embraced, an overtly racial notion of historical analysis. Indeed, more extreme exponents of Afrocentrism have argued that only those of African descent can truly understand, and hence study, African history. In the world of scholars who increasingly sees race as a social construct, such essentialist frameworks have become less and less popular.

**The Rise of Area Studies**

In the 1950s, the rise of area studies programs helped to further undermine the old Eurocentric models of world history. In the United States, the creation of a number of government-subsidized African studies programs provided an institutional foundation for a systematic study of African history. During the 1950s and 1960s a new generation of Africanists in Africa, the United States, and Europe helped develop an interdisciplinary historical methodology that embraced not only written documents, but also oral histories, linguistics, and archaeology as a means of reconstructing the African past. Over the decades since, the results of this research have established a rich and varied historiography. Such a body of historical knowledge could not be ignored by world historians, and as a result world history texts could no longer discount Africa as being without history.

But the area studies model was not without its drawbacks. In particular, the organization of different parts of the world into apparently coherent areas (largely based upon continental divisions) ascribed a meaning to units no more precise than the older concepts of race or civilization. Notably, world history textbooks followed the new structure of the field by basing their chapter organization on area studies frameworks, leading to a “meanwhile, in Africa” approach to the continent. Such a framework did little to undermine the old notion of an isolated Africa or of the idea of culturally coherent civilizations that had previously been advocated by
the likes of Hegel and Breasted, or even Diop. The 1980s and 1990s saw a challenge to these notions via the rise of concepts such as zones of interaction, which stressed the connections between regions rather than the difference between them. Regions such as “the Atlantic world” or “the Indian Ocean world” replaced continents as units of analysis. As Patrick Manning, one of a growing group of Africanists who have greatly influenced world history in recent years, argued in his 2003 work *Navigating World History*, it is the connections that make world history, not the separations.

Because these new regional units of analysis build on zones of interaction rather than on continents or civilizations, they threaten to deconstruct the very area studies frameworks that have done so much to further the history of Africa and other previously neglected regions of the world. The point here is that the changing “concepts” of Africa highlight that the concept of Africa itself is a construction, no less than that of race or civilization. The meaning of Africa, thus, has held different things for different audiences over time. Some based more in historical fact, and others based more in cultural and political agendas, perhaps, but all very real in terms of the impact on their audience's conceptions of world history. The changing notions of Africa highlight the fact that our understanding of both Africa and the world has been both interrelated and constantly changing for the past several hundred years. Indeed, it is rather difficult to understand the one without the other.

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See also Africa—Colonial; Africa—Equatorial and Southern (4000 BCE–100 CE); Africa—Postcolonial; African Religions; African American and Caribbean Religions; African Union; Afro-Eurasia; Aksum; Apartheid; Art—Africa; Benin; Egypt; Hausa States; Kanem-Bornou; Kenyatta, Jomo; Kongo; Mali; Mansa Musa; Mehmed II; Meroë; Nkramah, Kwame; Nubians; Pan-Africanism; Pastoral Nomadic Societies; Senghor, Léopold; Shaka Zulu; Slave Trades; Sokoto Caliphate; Songhai; Trading Patterns, Trans-Saharan; Tutu, Desmond; Wagadu Empire; Warfare—Africa; Zimbabwe, Great

Further Reading


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