

AFRICA AND THE DISCIPLINES

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF RESEARCH IN AFRICA
TO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

EDITED BY

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African Histories and the Dissolution of World History

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ONCE UPON A TIME historians used to know that certain civilizations (Western ones) were their natural subject matter, that some political leaders (Thomas Jefferson, Napoleon, Charlemagne) were worth knowing about, and that particular periods and developments (the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment, the rise of the nation-state) were worthy of our attention. Other places, other people, other cultural developments less central to the course of Western civilization did not count. Now all of that has come into question. Historians no longer agree on the subjects about which they ought to write.

Peter Novick, in a book on the evolution of the historical profession in the United States, tells about its current state in the titles of his last two chapters: "The Center Does Not Hold," and "There Was No King in Israel." He describes "the collapse of professional historical study as an even minimally cohesive venture" (1988, p. 579). Theodore Hame-row writes that "historians despair of being able to bring order out of chaos" (Novick 1988, p. 578).

The loss of agreement on history's subject is only one part of the change that provokes scholars to write about fragmentation and chaos. The debate on history's subject emerged at the same time that increasing numbers of historians began to doubt their own methods. Many now find it impossible to sustain the claims they might once have made that their choices of subject and method are based on objective knowledge. These historians have become acutely aware that their own writings, their ways of constructing a narrative, conceal some kinds of historical knowledge even while they reveal others, and that their choice of subject and method is a product of their own time and circumstances, not an inevitable outcome of the impersonal progress of historical science. This

change, which has roots within contemporary philosophy, also emerges from the evolution of the historian's craft itself.

It is a profound paradox of history-writing in the most recent era that our faith in objective historical knowledge has been shaken precisely because of the advance of "knowledge" in its objective sense. The authoritative version of historical knowledge has been undermined because historians, in recent decades, have built bodies of knowledge about which their predecessors could only have dreamed. By carrying assumptions about historical knowledge through to their conclusions, historians have discovered some of the limits of those assumptions.

The evolution of African history shows just how dramatic the growth of our understanding has been within the inherited framework of history as positive knowledge. In the mid-1950s graduate students of history at Harvard, Princeton, Chicago, Berkeley, Columbia, and almost all of America's other historically white universities lived in a world where African history did not exist. None of these major post-graduate institutions offered courses in the subject. In 1958-59 the American Historical Association surveyed department chairmen on the major fields of their graduate students. The total number of graduate students was 1,735; the number reported as concentrating in African history was 1.¹

By the late 1970s there were 600 professional African historians in the United States, and the number has continued to grow (Curtin 1980). Most of these wrote Ph.D. dissertations in African history, and many continue to do research after the doctorate. The growth in numbers has therefore led to an enormous expansion in knowledge. Among the Africanists are scholars who read the European archives in a new light to see what they reveal on African society; or there are those who study sources written in Arabic, whether by Africans or by Muslim visitors from outside the continent; and there are others who read sources in African languages, also collectors and critical analysts of oral traditions, historical linguists, scholars who specialize in African religion, in the history of African agriculture, of disease, of gender, of peasant movements, and of an endless range of other subjects.

One obvious consequence of the expansion of historical research in the years since 1960 has been to show just how limited were our earlier understandings. Much of the new specialized research focuses on people previously excluded from the general history of humanity. The history of Africa is not alone in this respect. Alongside it are new bodies of knowledge on the history of medieval peasants, of barbarians in ancient Europe, of slaves on American plantations, and of women as the previously silent majority (silent, at least, in historians' accounts) in every time and place.

The very substantial dimensions of the gains in our knowledge have led to a sense of doubt rather than triumph. Historians now understand the dubious criteria according to which women and Africans, peasants and slaves were excluded from the histories of earlier generations. They therefore cannot help but wonder which populations, and which domains of human experience, they themselves are excluding today.

The previously excluded histories do not only present new data to be integrated into the larger narrative; they raise questions about the validity of that narrative itself. University historians integrate African history into the history of the eighteenth century, or the nineteenth, and yet many histories written or recited in Africa do not measure historical time in centuries. Academic historians appropriate bits of the African past and place them within a larger framework of historical knowledge which has European roots—the history of commodity exchange, for example. They rarely think of using bits of European history to amplify African narratives, about the succession of Akan shrines or the origin and segmentation of Tiv lineages.

Even before these more difficult issues began to trouble historians, the growth of knowledge about non-European societies began to undermine earlier histories, to bring into question narratives of academic history which, in the 1960s, seemed to be beyond reproach. The new knowledge showed that what was once thought to be universal history was in fact very partial and very selective. The narrative of human history which Western historians held at that time could no longer stand. Its destruction contributed to the sense of fragmentation and lost coherence.

We can trace the process by which history undermined itself from within, by which knowledge grew and brought itself into doubt, by examining a number of books about history on a world scale, all of them published during the years of African history's growth. Some of these cover all the ages of human history, others cover only a brief period, but all of them attempt to integrate the history of every part of the world in a single narrative.

In the early 1960s it was still possible to describe human history in terms of a story with a single narrative thread, from the earliest periods until modern times. Now that possibility is gone. It is difficult for us to remember how profoundly our historical vision has changed unless we return to examine important works of that time. For example, William McNeill's *The Rise of the West*, published in 1963 when African history was just beginning to emerge, presented a unicentric and unidirectional narrative, of a kind that would not be acceptable today.

The Rise of the West divided the ancient world between "civilizations" and the land of "barbarians." The book focused on the diffusion

of the techniques of civilization, originally from Mesopotamia, and then within the area McNeill calls the *ecumene*, as opposed to the land of the barbarians. *Oikoumenê* (one of Arnold Toynbee's terms) had been used also by the great anthropologist A. L. Kroeber to mean "the range of man's most developed cultures" and therefore "the millennially inter-related civilizations in the connected main land masses of the Eastern Hemisphere" (1952, p. 379). This was an intercommunicating zone within which the basic techniques of civilization were created, and within which they spread. The zone's boundaries shifted with time, but its early core was in the ancient Near East.

The origin of civilization, in McNeill's narrative, grows out of the introduction of agriculture. On this subject he takes contradictory positions but tries to maintain a single narrative thread. Even though the introduction explains that agriculture was introduced more than once, the book's narrative focuses on the central role of Mesopotamia, making a partial exception only for the introduction of agriculture in China (1963, p. 11). About the Americas, McNeill wrote, "Seeds or cuttings must have been carried across the ocean by human agency at a very early time" (1963, p. 240). Then a bit later he explained that "contacts were far too limited and sporadic to allow the Amerindians to borrow extensively from the more advanced cultures of the Old World. As a result, the Andean and Mexican civilizations developed belatedly and never attained a mastery of their environment that could rival the levels attained by their contemporaries in Eurasia."² He saw no possibility that domestication had independent beginnings in Africa and wrote that agriculture came to eastern and southern Africa only within the past five centuries. Until then, "primitive hunters roamed as their forefathers had done for untold millennia" (McNeill 1963, p. 481).

This statement is itself incorrect by millennia. We now know, as scholars of that generation did not, that animal domestication came very early to Africa (possibly earlier than to Southwest Asia), and that there were autonomous centers of crop domestication in Africa south of the Sahara.³

Historians of McNeill's generation knew that great empires had grown up in sub-Saharan Africa by the first half of the present millennium—Ghana, Mali, Songhay, and other kingdoms in West Africa, and a great many kingdoms in eastern, central, and southern Africa, of which Zimbabwe was famous because of its great stone ruins. McNeill saw all of these as borrowings. The more advanced of Africa's societies, he wrote, "were never independent of the main civilizations of Eurasia" (1963, p. 252). Islam, in his view, played a central role in bringing Eurasia's civilization to Africa. Even the southward migration of Bantu-speaking agriculturalists "may have been reinforced by the mi-

gration of tribes fleeing from Moslem pressures in the northwest" (1963, p. 560).

Recent archaeological research in West Africa has shown that urbanism based on commerce came to West Africa before the birth of Islam. By about A.D. 500, Jenne, on the Niger River, emerged as a town built on local trade in agricultural surpluses drawn from lands flooded by the river. In this case, West Africans built their own town, which then grew further when Islam became important (McIntosh and McIntosh 1988).

In central and southern Africa, also, kingdoms grew out of local roots. Zimbabwe is only one among the region's many stone ruins built in similar styles. These were sited so as to make farming and transhumant cattle-keeping possible as well as long-distance trade. As in West Africa, the evidence points to the growth of locally rooted centers which came ultimately to participate in long-distance trade. History can no longer be written as a single clear narrative of the spread of civilization's arts from the *ecumene*, the historical heartland, to Africa and other parts of the world.⁴

Accounting for the new patterns challenged historians to find new ways of defining the spatial boundaries of important processes in world history. In this, as in so much else, the development of the *Annales* school of history writing in France interacted in creative ways with the development of African history. The creators of *Annales* history had a fresh historical vision; they challenged the orthodoxies of a style of history (associated with the legacy of Leopold von Ranke) that focused on the critical study of archival documents, especially as they related to the minutiae of political events. The early *Annalistes* reacted against the narrowly political definition of the historian's subject matter. Marc Bloch, in his early work, wrote about collectively held understandings of the world, in what seems to us now like an anthropological approach (Bloch 1924, 1925). Bloch, Lucien Febvre, and others were concerned with the history of society more generally, and not only with that narrow stratum to which the main political documents referred.⁵

Fernand Braudel, the great leader of second-generation *Annales* historians, opened up the boundaries of historical space in a way that made it easier for us to understand Africa in world history. Many earlier scholars had limited themselves to national histories, of France, or of Italy, or of Spain. Others moved beyond national boundaries to continental ones. Braudel in his masterpiece saw the Mediterranean, with its palms and olive trees, as a significant historical unit, even though it took in parts of Europe and parts of Africa and Asia. It was tied together by its sea routes, but then extended wherever human communication took

it: "We should imagine a hundred frontiers, not one," he wrote, "some political, some economic, and some cultural" (1976, p. 170).

A flexible approach to spatial boundaries gives us a tool with which to break out of narrow definitions of core and periphery in world history. We do not need to see West African Muslims in a narrow framework which casts them only as bearers of culture from the center of civilization to the periphery. We can see them as West Africans, in economy, in language, and in many elements of discursive practice, and yet at the same time Muslims. We do not read from a single historical map that inevitably separates Africans from Middle Easterners. We read many maps side by side, some for language, some for economy, some for religion. Similarly, when we define the boundaries of African healing practices we do not need to stop at the continent's edge; our history can extend to the Americas. If we adopt a flexible and situationally specific understanding of historical space, the plantation complex, which is often seen as narrowly American, as a phenomenon of the Caribbean, Brazil, and the southern United States, can now be understood as extending to the East Coast of Africa and to northern Nigeria (see Cooper 1977; Sheriff 1987; Lovejoy 1979).

Braudel, along with the other *Annales* historians, insisted on asking how representative our historical knowledge is in relation to the totality of the universe that might be described, if only we knew the full story. He saw the economy as studied by economists, for example, as only one small part of a much larger and more shadowy sphere of economic activity. He observed that "The market economy still controls the great mass of transactions *that show up in the statistics*," as a way of arguing that the historian ought to be concerned also with what does not show up in the statistics (1981, p. 24, emphasis in original). A concern with the representativeness of historical knowledge was at the heart of African history's growth, which in this sense can be seen as Braudelian in its inspiration.⁶ African historians were saying that even if conventional sources were silent on Africa, this could not be taken as evidence that nothing had happened in Africa. If the contours of world history were determined by the silence of our sources, and not by the shape of history's subject matter, then we needed to find new sources.

Yet Braudel himself could not break out of a unidirectional history of the world with Europe at its center. *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme*, his three-volume history of the world between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, is driven by a tension between Braudel's disciplined attempt to find the correct spatial frame for each phenomenon (to explain the eighteenth-century rise of population on a world-wide basis, for example), and his definition of modern world history as the rise of a dominant Europe.

Civilisation matérielle, as a world history, touches on Africa's place in comparative context. The first volume is concerned with the history of everyday material life: food, clothing, crops, housing, furniture, and so on. Braudel's weakness in understanding sub-Saharan Africa does not undermine his more general analysis, except as it shapes his most general reflections on the full range of human experience.⁷ The same is true of the second volume, on the techniques by which people exchanged goods in various parts of the world. In the third volume, however, the question of Africa's place in history (and Latin America's) comes closer to the center of the analysis. This volume, which draws heavily on the thought of Immanuel Wallerstein, asks about the process by which a dominant capitalist world economy emerged, with its core in the West. In 1750, he says, the countries which were later to become industrialized produced 22.5 percent of the world's gross product. In 1976 the same countries produced 75 percent of that product. What were the origins of this movement from the relative economic parity of the world's parts to the dominance of the capitalist core (1984, p. 534; 1982, p. 134)?

Wallerstein, whose analytic framework (of that period) Braudel adopts, began to explore the history of the world economy in order to answer questions which came to him as a specialist in the sociology of Africa. The 1970s were a time when many African nations, born in optimism during the 1960s, were forced to come to terms with the intractable nature of their poverty. Wallerstein reflected on its causes and origins. He borrowed from writings about dependency in Latin America and formulated an interpretive framework describing the whole of the world, in the most recent period, as a capitalist system, irrespective of local forms of labor organization or ownership. The most important inequalities, Wallerstein argued, may be understood in terms of a spatial metaphor. The powerful countries of the capitalist core draw strength from their relationship to the poor countries of the periphery; the semi-periphery plays a mediating role that is important for the political stability of the total system (Wallerstein 1974a, Wallerstein 1974b, and the forthcoming book by Cooper et al. explore the way in which writing about Africa and Latin America has led to the fragmentation of Wallerstein's world history. See also Stern 1988, DuPlessis 1987, and Jewsiewicki 1987).

Braudel adopted this framework, with its concern for the systematic character of inequality between the people he called "*les have et les have not*" (1979, p. 16). He was interested in how the dominance of the capitalist center grew out of developments within Europe, and out of relations among local world-economies. These latter were the spatial units which achieved a certain organic integration because of the density

of exchange relations within them. The Mediterranean of the sixteenth century was a world-economy in this sense.

Braudel tried to make a serious assessment of the degree to which wealth drawn from outside Europe contributed to the rise of capitalism, but he treated Africans, and to a lesser extent people of the Americas, as historical actors only to the extent that they met European needs (1984, p. 386):

While we might have preferred to see this "Non-Europe" on its own terms, it cannot properly be understood, even before the eighteenth century, except in terms of the mighty shadow cast over it by western Europe. . . . It was from all over the world . . . that Europe was now drawing a substantial part of her strength and substance. And it was this extra share which enabled Europeans to reach superhuman heights in tackling the tasks encountered on the path to progress.

This is a rather strange statement, lumping together much of the world simply on the basis that it is not Europe and proposing to ignore non-Europe on its own terms.

Braudel describes African developments, in particular, in terms of racial essences. In his view all civilization originated from the north, radiating southwards. He writes, "I should like now to concentrate on the heartland of Black Africa, leaving aside the countries of the Maghreb—a 'White Africa' contained within the orbit of Islam" (1984, p. 430). Braudel's understanding of historical space is usually a subtle one in which each spatial frame is carefully differentiated. Here, however, he merges several frames in an inflexible and inaccurate way. Firstly, he merges race ("White" or "Black") with religion (Islamic or non-Islamic), even though many of the Muslims were people he would otherwise have described as "Black."

Secondly, he characterizes "Black Africa" as passive and inert. He writes that European ships on the West Coast met "neither resistance nor surveillance" and that the same thing happened on the shores of the desert: "Islam's camel-trains were as free to choose their entry-points as Europe's ships" (1984, p. 434). This is demonstrably incorrect. A very large body of historical literature explores the complex interactions between West African kings or traders and those who came across the desert from the north. The spread of Islam and of the trans-Saharan trade was shaped by initiatives taken on both sides of the desert.⁸

According to Braudel, all movement was in a single direction. "Curiously, no black explorers ever undertook any of the voyages across either the desert or the ocean which lay on their doorstep. . . . To the African, the Atlantic was, like the Sahara, an impenetrable obstacle"

(1984, p. 434). He writes this despite the knowledge (with which he was certainly acquainted) that many Muslims who traded across the desert, or who went on the pilgrimage to Mecca from the West African Sudan, were Africans he would describe as black, carrying the cultural heritage of West Africa with them. Black African rulers are reported as having made the pilgrimage to Mecca as early as the eleventh century (Al-Naqar 1972, p. 27). Mansa Musa of Mali traveled from West Africa to Cairo and then to Mecca in the fourteenth century with a retinue reported to number 60,000 (Hiskett 1984, p. 15; see also pp. 29, 34, and 55). Even though the correct number is likely to be smaller, there is no question that thousands of Africans crossed the desert to visit the world of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, and others (from the East Coast) crossed the Indian Ocean to reach the Persian Gulf and India.

Finally, it appears to be the case that Braudel's characterization of the difference between "Black Africa" and "White Africa" is based on his understanding of race. In *Grammaire des civilisations* he acknowledges that Ethiopia (in this case Christian) was a civilization, explaining that it "undeniably possesses white ethnic elements, and is founded on a *métisse* population, very different, however, from those of the true Melano-Africans" (1987, p. 152). At times he denies the existence of facts in order to preserve the clear distinction between a Black Africa that is uncivilized and a White Africa that is civilized. In a 1963 book he acknowledges that the region near the Gulf of Guinea was urbanized very early (1987, p. 164; originally published 1963). But then in a later book which argues that towns were one of the distinguishing marks of civilization, he writes that there were no towns on the fringes of the Gulf of Guinea (1981, pp. 292–93).

Because historians have come to a fuller understanding of African urbanization, and of African initiatives in intercontinental exchange, it is now easy to see the weakness of this small part of Braudel's work. A central question remains, however: whether his unidirectional interpretation of Africa is merely an unfortunate idiosyncrasy of an otherwise great historian, or whether it is a sign of deeper problems in the way many historians construct their narratives.

In the work of Pierre Chaunu and Bartolome Bennassar, members of the third generation of *Annales* historians, we can see the tension between the new African evidence, showing autonomous processes, and the older vision of world history in which progress radiated from a few historic civilizations. In their history of the world between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, the central process is the merging of local historical spaces into a single interconnected worldwide space. Bennassar took care to read the new Africanist work, but then only partially assimilated it. He explains, for example, that many of the Muslim mer-

chants of West Africa were black West Africans, and that Islam played no role in the advanced agriculture and metallurgy of the "Bantu civilization" of the great lakes region of East Africa (Bennassar and Chaunu 1977, pp. 71 and 73). In the same chapter, however, he writes about the great lakes region "from Lake Rudolf to Lake Nyasa, where black states with diversified economies were . . . able to establish themselves insofar as Arab penetration stimulated the commercial function" (Bennassar and Chaunu 1977, p. 72). This view of Arab penetration, for which there is no evidence, appears aimed at fixing the position of Africa clearly within the broader narrative.

The broader narrative in Bennassar and Chaunu's book, in Braudel's work, and in McNeill's, tells about the impact of "civilizations" on the world. Despite the centrality of "civilizations," the term is not always the subject of careful discussion. McNeill, who wrote that "civilized society had much to impart and relatively little to learn from peoples not yet civilized," defined civilization as "a style of human life characterized by a complexity, wealth, and general impressiveness that justify the epithet 'civilized'" (McNeill 1963, pp. 65 and 32).

"Civilization" in its usage over the centuries in the English language has carried connotations of self and other, or of the proper and improper ordering of society. To "civilize," in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1933), is "to polish what is rude or uncouth . . . to domesticate, tame (wild animals) . . . to make 'civil'" in the sense of "having proper public or social order." "Civilization" is a civilized condition or state in these senses, but then also "a developed or advanced state of human society."

Braudel makes a distinction between "civilizations" and "cultures," with the societies of black Africa counted among the cultures. In *The Structures of Everyday Life* he writes that "a culture is a civilization that has not yet achieved maturity" (1981, p. 101), but then in *Grammaire des civilisations* he borrows from Lévi-Strauss' division of societies between clocks and steam-engines, to argue:

The societies which correspond to cultures are those . . . which have a tendency to maintain themselves indefinitely in their initial state, which explains furthermore why they appear to us as societies without history and without progress. . . . In brief primitive cultures will be the fruit of egalitarian societies, for whom relations between groups are regulated once and for all and repeat themselves, whereas civilizations are founded on hierarchical societies, with . . . changing tensions, social conflicts, political struggle, and perpetual evolution. [Braudel 1987, p. 48]

African cultures, according to this argument, are egalitarian and static, European civilizations hierarchical and dynamic.

The strongest external sign of civilization, according to Braudel, is the presence of towns (1987, p. 48), but these in turn are indicators of the existence of hierarchic space, divided between rich centers and poor peripheries (Braudel 1979, p. 16). Spatial inequalities emerge where intercommunication and commerce are well developed and where agriculture is productive. The productivity of civilized society is the fruit of farming with a plough; cultures usually rely on the hoe (Braudel 1981, pp. 56–64, 174–82). Chaunu is clear on the reason for the importance of agricultural change: increased productivity leads to rising population densities, which are accompanied in turn by the emergence of hierarchy (Bennassar and Chaunu 1977, pp. 47–51). One of the central elements in the emergence of civilization is the existence of writing. Chaunu writes that he follows Braudel on the importance of writing for civilization: "The arts of memory are situated at the heart of accumulation" and writing is "the most efficacious" of the arts of memory (Bennassar and Chaunu 1977, p. 56, n. 49).

We have here a complex of elements which together form a coherent configuration: political and economic hierarchy, towns, commerce and intercommunication, writing, the plough, high densities of population, and historical dynamism.

The problem with this complex when applied to Africa, in the context of world histories like Braudel's or Bennassar and Chaunu's, is that the interrelations do not hold. In much of sub-Saharan Africa ploughs are not used because they are damaging to tropical soils. Some areas boasted thriving commerce, considerable intercommunication, and high population densities, but without political hierarchy.

The Igbo-speaking areas of southeastern Nigeria, for example, had very high population densities; in recent times some parts of the region have reached 800 per square mile. People cultivated the land with hoes, had a very dense network of periodic markets (in which markets took turns with one another on four- or eight-day cycles to make it easy for merchants to move from one to another), and had a network also of long-distance trade fairs. By late in the first millennium A.D. the region was importing substantial quantities of trade goods overland from the Mediterranean—all this without writing and, in most parts of Igboland, without clear forms of political hierarchy. Egalitarian councils maintained the market peace, and the agents of religious oracles communicated over long distances. Many different kinds of ritual functionaries coexisted in Igboland, each preserving one or another form of knowledge, to be transmitted orally to the next generation. Artisans practiced numerous crafts. The region was an economically dynamic one both internally and in relation to export trade; when demand for palm oil grew in the early nineteenth century, Igboland and the area to the south

of it rose to the challenge, and by 1853 were exporting 30,000 tons of palm oil a year, using indigenous forms of organization.⁹ It did not by any means belong in the set of societies to which Braudel would assign it—those with a “tendency to maintain themselves indefinitely in their initial state . . . for whom relations between groups are regulated once and for all and repeat themselves.”

The point of this is extremely important: the historical experience of southeastern Nigeria followed a pattern for which the historians’ category of “civilization” was largely irrelevant. The region had high population densities in the absence of hierarchical states, commerce without literacy, and productive agriculture without ploughs. “Civilization’s” characteristics—high population density, commerce, hierarchy, and so on—are meaningful only insofar as the separate elements have relational significance for one another: to the extent that the plough, political hierarchy, and mercantile activity are interrelated, for example. The elements have no explanatory significance if treated simply as a check list. In this part of Nigeria, it is clear, a different set of interrelations was at work. It is no wonder that historians, faced with the obligation to take seriously the history of Igboland, complain of “fragmentation” and “chaos” in historical knowledge. Some of the long-accepted categories of historical understanding are irrelevant.

This is not to say that Braudel, or Bannassar and Chaunu, were uninterested in the principles underlying change in African societies. Bannassar, for example, explored the principles of African social organization in his search for an answer to the central question asked also by Braudel: Why was Africa not the place where economic change took off? Why was it not Africa where the great breakthrough to capitalism occurred? In order to answer this question, Bannassar began from an understanding of the social factors that led to the breakthrough in Europe. The central factor, in his view, was the partial freedom of merchants from political control, and their capacity to accumulate wealth in their own right. He looked for the same factors in Africa, beginning with what seem to him the most advanced of the African kingdoms. In the kingdom of Kongo, he argued, merchants were closely controlled by the king. Land reverted to the king at the owner’s death, thus cutting off the possibility of accumulation. The king was the source of poverty and prosperity, merchants lacked autonomy, and economic growth was restricted (Bannassar and Chaunu 1977, pp. 85–87).

The analysis falls down, however, not only because of the wide diversity of state structures in Africa, but also because of the incorrectness of its more basic assumption that autonomous merchants require a state structure in order to carry on their business. John Janzen has written the history of a set of institutions with mercantile functions which cut

across regions occupied by states and regions of acephalous political organization. It is an area extending beyond the northern edge of the Kongo kingdom, mostly to the north of the Congo River as it descends to the Atlantic Ocean. This was a region of intense activity among merchants who traded locally and contributed to the export trade. The seventeenth-century ivory trade was fed by an annual kill of 3,000 to 4,000 elephants. Estimates, also in the seventeenth century, had it that the region was capable of exporting up to forty tons of copper a year.¹⁰ Yet a crucial part of the region’s economy was outside the borders of any kingdom. It was an area in which a number of important governmental functions were borne by Lemba—a healing association or, in Janzen’s (and Victor Turner’s) term, “a drum of affliction.”

People were initiated into Lemba as a way of treating their illnesses, yet it was also a form of commercial organization. Initiates played an essential role in maintaining free passage across an entire network of four-day markets. Lemba was a form of religious expression, a consecrated medicine, in which the highest levels of initiation were very expensive. The richest merchants were most likely to rise to the top of Lemba, and they used ritual networks to advance their economic interests. It is an example of exactly the sort of mercantile autonomy for which Bannassar was searching. He did not find it (or other similar institutions), however, because the world historian does not normally search for mercantile activity in “the sacred medicine of governing”; . . . ‘the government of multiplication and reproduction . . . and ‘sacred medicine integrating people, villages and markets’” (Janzen 1982, p. 4).

The problem here is that the categories of historical analysis are normally drawn from Europe, and therefore the historian looks in Africa for a familiar constellation of king, nobles, church, and merchants. “The sacred medicine of governing” is alien to the analysis. V. Y. Mudimbe has explained that functional analyses depend on a contrast between the normal and the pathological. If what is European is defined as normal, then the non-European appears to be disordered, abnormal, primitive (1988, pp. 27 and 191–92).

How, then, do we construct an account of world history within a single framework, if the principles of social organization of Lemba, or in Igboland, are different from principles in Europe? Eric Wolf tries to do this, to construct a coherent account while giving full weight to non-Europeans, in *Europe and the People without History* (1982). Because he works so hard to reverse the balance of emphasis from Europe to “the people without history,” we can see the limits and the difficulties of the enterprise.

The early parts of the book make no attempt to picture a unified

process in world history. Wolf orients the early description around three "modes of production." In other hands these might be used to reduce diverse experience to a few simple types within a scheme made in Europe. If this were the case, Wolf would have done violence to locally specific principles of organization, African ones among others. But it is not the case. The "modes" are heuristic categories. These are not types of societies, he writes, but rather "constructs in which to envisage certain strategic relationships."¹¹ He makes a broad sketch of the world's social geography and political organization in 1400, emphasizing autonomous political forms, especially those which are not purely local, and which make regional integration possible. Wolf then moves on to the career of capitalism, from the time of its early origins.

It is for the capitalist period that Wolf aims to construct a universal history, based on regularities in the historical process and not only in the historian's frame of analysis. The rise of the world market leads to the emergence of money (and of prices) as a universal language. Goods everywhere in the world become commodities, and these "can be compared and exchanged without reference to the social matrix in which they were produced" (1982, p. 310). Each commodity has a quantitative value in relation to all other commodities because of the existence of market institutions.

For the period when a world market exists, the historian can write a universal history of the way commodities are produced and exchanged. This is Wolf's project. He sketches the political and economic consequences of the fur trade for the peoples of North America, and of the slave trade for Africa. Later in the book he tours the world, showing the effects of commodity production—explaining the impact of rubber production, for example, on the Amazon basin and on southern Asia.

Wolf's focus on non-Europeans in world history is especially useful in revealing how difficult it is to construct a single master-narrative, for there must necessarily be levels of experience he does not describe—levels at which people struggle to create new ways of giving cultural form to social action, levels at which local experience escapes from the regularity of "universal" processes.¹²

Recent work by Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff shows, for example, that objects become commodities in culturally specific ways (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; see also Geary 1986; Cassanelli 1986). Objects, in this view, have a life history during which they move into and out of commodity status, as in the case of an heirloom which family members will not sell until a particular point in the family's life cycle when it becomes available for sale. The pattern by which objects move into and out of commodity status varies from one society to another.

Sharon Hutchinson, writing on the Nuer of the southern Sudan,

shows that money and commodities are culturally constructed in ways radically different from the expected ones. The culture of commodities is locally constructed, not a universal pattern. Nor can one "predict how money will be conceptualized and incorporated by other cultures" (Hutchinson 1988, p. 179).

Nuer these days work for wages, become active as merchants, and engage in the trade of cattle and other commodities as buyers and sellers. They can therefore be said to have entered the capitalist world of commodity exchange; they speak the universal language of money and price. Nevertheless, cattle are commodities in relatively circumscribed contexts; they are unlike the commodities described by Wolf, or the commodities found in Marx, for whom capitalist exchange breaks down boundaries and opens free movement. Nuer sell cattle for money, but they may not exchange the money thus earned in all the ways they might have exchanged cattle. The crucial difference between money and cattle is that "cattle have blood," which people equate with procreative force; "money has no blood." For this reason money cannot be used in contexts where the blood of cattle is relevant: for bloodwealth, or sacrifice, or (except to a limited extent) for bridewealth. Even when cattle are used in social transactions, distinctions are made between the uses of animals bought with money ("cattle of money") and animals which came as bridewealth ("cattle of girls").

Money itself is not a homogeneous medium of exchange for people in Nuerland. Money earned emptying latrines or doing domestic work is called "money of shit," and it cannot be used to purchase cows. "Cattle bought with the money of shit cannot live" (Hutchinson 1988, p. 152). Other wages are called "money of sweat," and earnings from the sale of livestock are "money of cattle." For the Nuer, money is not universally fluid. There are several kinds of it, with several uses (Hutchinson 1988, pp. 108, 110, 115–16, 148, 149, 152–62, 176, and 179).

Nuer have constructed a new synthesis of market and community, a new set of exchange categories, to meet their own particular needs. It is this sort of creative process which is not accounted for in a narrative of the spread of commodities in world history. To say this is not to deny the existence of commodities, nor of their commensurability on a worldwide basis, nor of the significance of the emergence of a world market. It is simply to say that the history of commodities is not a total history, that there are realms of experience beyond its reach.

Comparative history is still possible for historians who set modest goals. *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, by Philip Curtin, explores the form taken by preindustrial trading networks which link people across cultural boundaries. This is a comparative historical so-

ciology focusing on settlements of commercial specialists, removed physically from their home communities and living as strangers among their hosts, linked together with other such settlements in a commercial network, a "trade diaspora." Chinese traders created a trade diaspora in Southeast Asia, as did the Juula in West Africa, and Phoenicians and Greeks in the Mediterranean. The interlinked communities of merchants provided trading services and information to one another across widely dispersed areas. Curtin uses the trade diaspora to explore the definition of intercommunicating zones in world history. This is a return to the issues raised by McNeill (Curtin writes about "regions of ecumenical trade"), but with unidirectional history now dead. "One of the myths of African history," he writes, "is the old view that commerce in Africa was largely pioneered by outsiders. . . . In fact, trade beyond the village level began on African initiative" and moved outward from there (Curtin 1984, pp. 15–16). Curtin rejects the idea that trade diasporas are linked to all-encompassing economic systems, in the style of Wallerstein or Andre Gunder Frank. "They are only one influence on the course of history among many" (Curtin 1984, p. 9).

A reading of McNeill, Braudel, Bannassar and Chaunu, Wolf, Curtin, and others points to a larger and more general development: that the emergence of African history (and of Asian and Latin American history) has changed our understanding of general history, and of Europe's place in the world, in profound ways. It is no longer possible to defend the position that historical processes among non-European peoples can be seen as the consequence of all-encompassing influences emerging from a dominant European center. This shift in our understanding is uncomfortable for those who see history as the spread of civilization from a European center, and it is equally uncomfortable for those who sketch history in terms of an all-determining system of capitalist exploitation.

The shift away from historical narratives that originate in Europe has been both accompanied and enabled by innovations in methods for constructing knowledge about people who had previously been left out of academic histories. These renovated methods, some of which achieved their fullest early development among historians of Africa, include oral history, historical archaeology, and historical linguistics, as well as anthropologically informed historical analysis. The new methods and modes of interpretation made it possible for scholars to approach the history of non-literate people, and in many cases powerless ones, without departing from the accepted critical canons of historical research. Scholars were able to know histories they had never known before. The consequences were, once again, paradoxical. These significant advances in the range and quality of historical knowledge helped

to shake historians' faith in the quality of their knowledge. To glimpse whole regions of history previously unknown, to see the dark side of the moon, inevitably shook scholars' faith in their own omniscience.

The methodological advances were not narrowly African ones. They had an impact in a number of historical fields, but many of them emerged with particular clarity and power amongst historians of Africa.¹³ The impact of oral history was bound to be great in studies of sub-Saharan Africa, where many societies were ideally suited for this form of research: their people transmitted substantial bodies of knowledge from one generation to the next and sustained complex political and economic hierarchies, all without practicing writing. Oral traditions were still alive (in many cases *are* still alive) when the historians of the 1960s and 1970s went about their work. Unlike Latin America, where the colonial period had begun several centuries earlier, it was only in the late nineteenth century that most of sub-Saharan Africa experienced conquest. Before this Europeans did not, in most cases, intervene directly in the transmission of knowledge.

Jan Vansina's *De la tradition orale* was the first to make a coherent case among Africanists that oral traditions could be usable as historical sources, and it offered basic elements of a method (Vansina 1961, revised in 1985; see also Miller 1980; Cassanelli 1982; Cohen 1985). In many cases the academic historians were Africans who themselves had opportunity to learn bits of orally transmitted history in their own childhoods, and who returned with historians' tools to study some of the same traditions (Kimambo 1969; Ogot 1967; Samatar 1982; Alagoa 1964, 1972, 1980; Were 1967). Historians have come to understand that the narratives themselves, as told within African society, are not socially neutral recitations that serve all equally. They are as much a subject of struggle, located in a web of power relations, as are accounts of the glories of Western civilization or of Afrocentric creativity. The historical interpreter must read traditions (must listen to them and watch them performed) with attention to the forms of domination inscribed in them, and the web of social relations in which they are embedded (see Feierman 1990 and Tonkin 1992).

The sense that there was a world of historical experience in Africa beyond what was described in documents led historians to explore other techniques of historical reconstruction alongside those for studying oral history. Historical archaeology—the archaeology of relatively recent periods (the past 3,000 years)—combining oral traditions, ethnography, and the more usual archaeological techniques, has served historians well in the absence of a rich documentary record (Schmidt 1978, 1983*a*, 1983*b*, 1990; Chittick 1974; Posnansky 1969; McIntosh and McIntosh 1980*a*, 1980*b*, 1984, 1986; Shinnie and Kense 1989). Afri-

can historians have also made creative use of historical linguistics (Ehret 1968, 1971, 1988; Schoenbrun 1990).

The amplified range of methods employed by African historians has proven useful not only in societies that lack writing, but also for studying the underclasses of societies with a considerable range of literacy. Historians have used these amplified methods to construct rich accounts of the African majority in colonial society and especially to bring us magnificent accounts of peasant resistance to colonial domination.¹⁴

The best studies of resistance to conquest, the work of Allen Isaacman, for example, explore the central tensions of African society before conquest—the course of resistance to domination by indigenous authorities—so that even the history of colonial rule is divided between histories made in Europe and others which find their sources of coherence within African histories, as rooted in oral traditions (Isaacman 1972, 1976, 1990; Ranger 1985a).

The sense that we can no longer tell history as a single story, from a single consistent point of view or from a unified perspective, strikes deep resonances in recent social and cultural thought. Michel Foucault wrote, in *Language, Countermemory, Practice*, that the idea of the whole of society “arose in the Western world, in this highly individualized historical development that culminates in capitalism. To speak of the ‘whole of society’ apart from the only form it has ever taken is to transform our past into a dream” (quoted in Jay 1984, p. 521). The very categories by which we understand universal experience originate in the particular experience of the core of the capitalist world.

This is the same lesson taught by an examination of African history: the categories which are ostensibly universal are in fact particular, and they refer to the experience of modern Europe. That we have learned this lesson in two different ways—through philosophically based writings on Europe and through histories of non-Europeans—forces us to ask about the relationship between the two sets of developments. A central question which has not yet been fully addressed is the relationship between the crisis of historical representation that came about when historians began to hear the voices of those who had been voiceless, and the more general epistemological crisis affecting all the social sciences and humanities.

To answer this question one would need to write a general political and intellectual history of the years since World War II. It is only possible, in the scope of a few paragraphs, to make tentative suggestions.

In the decades after 1945, the politics of race turned in a decisively new direction in the European colonial empires and in the United States. The struggles which led to decolonization—wars in Indochina,

Algeria, and Kenya, and less violent independence movements in innumerable other territories—led to a reconsideration among European intellectuals of the qualities and values that had been defined as European. The loss of empire happened at a time when some thinkers were questioning whether historians and others in the human sciences were at all capable of describing the Other, or whether by doing so they were engaging in what Emmanuel Levinas called “ontological imperialism,” in which otherness vanishes and becomes part of the same (Young 1990, p. 13).

Some thinkers argued that descriptions of the native, the colonial Other, were embedded in a discourse in which Europeans defined themselves. In Edward Said’s words, “The Orient was . . . not Europe’s interlocutor, but its silent other” (Said 1985, p. 17).¹⁵ How was it possible to define freedom unless one could contrast it with bondage, autonomy except in contrast to slavery, or civilization (itself at the heart of world history, as we have seen) except in contrast to barbarism? Without the native, without the slave, the bondsman, or the barbarian, the central values of the West are difficult to imagine. The slave and the barbarian were not incidental to civilization, aberrant conditions at the margins; they were constitutive of civilization, a way civilization defined itself. With the civil rights movement in the United States, similar perceptions began to emerge, that slavery and later forms of racial oppression were not errors at the margins of American society; they had, in some fundamental way, defined American society. The relationship between race and America’s central egalitarian values was, in Gunnar Myrdal’s term, “An American Dilemma.”¹⁶

The decline of the colonial empires and the end of official segregation in the United States brought increasing numbers of nonwhites into the world’s historical profession and into the audiences that historians addressed. In the 1960s many newly independent African nations founded their own universities. The Africans who staffed the new history departments had a compelling interest in reconstructing the autonomous history of Africans within the national borders. British, or French, or American historians, who were now looking at the history of nations in a very different way than they had seen the history of colonies, were influenced also by the expanded presence of Africans and African-Americans as colleagues and as students. The result of all these developments was that a growing group of historians began to work seriously in Africa, in Europe, and in North America, to reconstruct and recover the African past.

There were other forces at work in the wider intellectual transformation—the rise of women in academia and of feminism, and radical shifts in the history of science which influenced thinking about history

...ness, two of the most central ones grew out of the racial politics of the postwar decades: a sense of the defining place of the subordinated Other in European discourses, and the opening up of non-Western histories as legitimate subjects of historical research.

The specialist work of historical reconstruction served to take the people about whom anthropologists had always written and to insist that they be placed within the larger historical narrative. The change in context required a change in how historians understood agency. Previously mute people now had to be seen as authors and actors. Exotic cultures were not new to the academic imagination, but the style of description was new. The new knowledge broke with a long intellectual tradition that treated exotic cultures as though they existed at a different time from the rest of humanity—stone age, or bronze age, or iron age peoples, remnants of the past, not living in the same world where historians live, not subject to the same political and economic forces (Fabian 1983).

Once historians of Africa took exotic cultures out of their “culture gardens” and into their own world, that world no longer existed in the same form. Treating Africans and women, peasants and slaves as historical actors presented a fundamental challenge to general historical understanding. It challenged the notion that history told from the point of view of a narrower and less representative population was value-neutral or universal.

The challenge it presents to African history is just as fundamental. The historical experiences of Africans on their own continent must be understood in the terms of the actors themselves, with a culturally specific sense of the actors’ language and motivations. What did it mean, for example, when a young dependent man took a “wife” within the Lemba healing association? She was not a wife with whom he expected to build a household, farm together, and procreate; she was a “wife” with whom he established a social tie only in the context of healing. What did a childless Igbo woman see as her alternatives when she came before the Aro oracle to learn the causes of her childlessness? When do Nuer men resort to blood sacrifice? What do they mean to accomplish by it? These are questions that can only be answered by a historian who sinks deep roots in the particular local forms of historical experience.

Having done this, the historian cannot assume that Africans, taking culturally grounded actions, only had the power to shape local events or to take part in local processes. Lemba marriages helped to establish networks of relationship that would enable men to participate in the overseas trade in slaves and ivory, in copper and other goods. In Igboland the Aro oracle ruled in many cases that local offenders should

be sent off in the Atlantic slave trade. Nuer men lived under colonial rule, and they needed to adjust their activities within the colonial economy so as to accumulate wealth in forms that made sacrifice possible. In doing so they changed the shape of colonial control.

The Lemba initiate, the Igbo woman, and the Nuer man were all helping to shape historical processes of enormous scope. The problem for the historian, then, is how to capture all different levels at the same time, how to do justice to the local, the regional, and the international in a single description or a single framework of analysis.¹⁷

It is worth making a brief exploration of the history of the place of Africans in the Atlantic slave trade to understand some of the problems of multilayered interpretation. The slave trade was a set of actions which articulated with one another on an enormous scale, reaching across several continents. Individual slaves might have been torn from their homes hundreds of miles into the interior of Nigeria, or of Angola, or of some other part of the continent. If we can imagine a brother and sister taken together, then perhaps the brother found himself walking to the coast to embark on a ship, while his sister stopped along the way to toil as an unfree worker nearer to home. Once the brother crossed the ocean he would forge bonds with other slaves, perhaps from the Gold Coast or the Guinea Coast. He might well have worked on a sugar plantation owned by a capitalist in the north of England. Defined as a spatial system, in Braudelian terms, a system of slavery extended to the Caribbean, to North, South, and Central America, to Europe, and also to the Indian Ocean.

Within an imagined system, understood in this way, there were many other boundaries: local ones, and the boundaries of subsystems. Each local area had its own patterns of custom and of language, its own characteristic forms of social interaction. People spoke to one another in local languages, became Lemba brides and grooms, or consulted the Aro oracle. Yet they also participated in a coordinated meta-system of meaning and action reaching all the way across from the interior of Africa to the Americas, and to Europe.

Historians have long worked to place the diverse and heterogeneous elements of the slave trade within a clear narrative of the way history unfolded, moving in a single direction to shape the world as we know it. *Capitalism and Slavery*, published by Eric Williams in 1944, opened a continuing debate on the relationship between slavery and the rise of capitalism. According to Williams, slavery in the Caribbean contributed to the formation of capital in Great Britain. The industrialization of Europe, in this view, was built on the backs of slaves in the Americas. Debate over these issues has continued, but historians of a later generation have also extended their reasoning about economic in-