

**BANISHING THE SILENCES: TOWARDS THE GLOBALIZATION OF AFRICAN HISTORY**

African history has yet to rid itself of the epistemic violence of imperialist historiography, with its erasures, omissions, fabrications, stereotypes, and what Jacques Depelchin calls silences, the willful distortions and denials of Africa's historicity and humanity, its agency and autonomy. Depelchin's *Silences in African History: Between the Syndromes of Discovery and Abolition* is a powerful and timely reminder that fifty years after the nationalist historiographical revolt, African history continues to be enveloped in the Eurocentric shadows of silence and subjugation that seek to hide, on the one hand, the horrendous pain and costs of Europe's barbarities from the slave trade to colonialism, neocolonialism to globalization, and on the other the memories of resistance and the possibilities of renewal embedded in those memories and in reconstructed pasts and futures imagined outside of European time, of Europe's usurpation of world history.

Africanist historians are deeply immersed, according to Depelchin's searing indictment, in the civilizational and conceptual conceits of discovery and abolitionism—the enduring fallacies of disciplinary innovation and social conscience—that they are the intellectual progenitors of African history and the global interlocutors for African peoples. Depelchin's charges of commission and omission in the paradigms of silence and the paradigmatic silences of Africanist and imperialist historiographies are all encompassing. There is the unethical sanitization and simplification of Africa's traumatic experiences with capitalism's insatiable appetites of imperialism, colonialism, and neocolonialism—from Atlantic slavery to Leopold's red rubber terror to South Africa's apartheid to the Rwanda genocide; the epistemic excision of African societies, economies, and polities in the canons of the disciplines from anthropology to economics to literature to history through the particularization, peripheralization, and pathologization of African phenomena; the pauperizing distortions and deformities of development policies perpetrated by the institutional and ideological gendarmes of global capitalism from the World Bank to the purveyors of globalization theories; and the dehumanizing representations in the invented and fictionalized Africas of the western imaginary from scholarly and literary texts to the popular media. It ends with tributes to Fanon's revolutionary and visionary repudiation of the ruins of empire and the limits of elite nationalism, and to the martyred Ken Saro-Wiwa, sacrificed on the altar of postcolonial kleptocracy and tyranny.

These are all familiar critiques, common cries of anger and anguish among activist African historians and intellectuals, sick and tired of being marginalized in the production of scholarly knowledge on and about Africa and of portrayals of Africa's marginality in and from the world. This is a subject I have written on extensively in a series of essays and at greater length in *Manufacturing African Studies and Crises* and *Rethinking Africa's Globalization: The Intellectual Challenges* (Zeleza 1997, 2003). Depelchin's interrogation of this problem and problematic is as powerful and poignant as any. For me the fundamental question that the book raises, and for which we need an answer, is broached in the title of chapter eight: "Is it possible to break out of silences without falling into the syndromes of discovery and abolition?" This, I would submit, is the most profound challenge that has confronted radical African intellectuals and historians in the last two centuries: Is autonomy of African history possible, can this history be written without European referents, is it possible to liberate African history from the epistemological traps of Eurocentricism, the tropes of the "colonial library"?

For Depelchin salvation lies in reconstituting the practices and paradigms of producing historical knowledge rooted in the democratization and decentering of knowledge production. History needs to be freed from the stifling enclosures of specialized academic discourse and turned into a palaver, a community conversation that is critical, creative and convivial, in which the production, consumption, and valorization of knowledge are popular and public activities for any community's self-understanding, self-definition, self-regulation, and social progress. From this perspective, then, any emancipatory project of producing historical knowledge has to be a collective process that involves, methodologically, the use of all forms of texts including oral texts and other artifacts of the human experience, and one that is based, conceptually, on a complex view of society, that understands history, borrowing from the notion of creolite, as a braided tapestry of multiple human experiences, voices, encounters, and engagements devoid of hierarchies and hegemony, free from oppressive fundamentalist and teleological certitudes.

*Silences in African History* offers an invaluable entry point for interrogating the enduring questions of African history: Africa's place in the world and the challenges of African self-fashioning and self-representation, that is, African historical agency in a world marked by the powerful dictates, demands, destructions, and discourses of imperialism that have mutated from colonialism to neocolonialism and now globalization. I would like to suggest that the project and process of reclaiming and rewriting African history needs to proceed, as they did with the nationalist generation, not only through critiques of prevailing silences in western Africanist historiographies, but also vigorous reconstructions of African histories that have temporal depth and spatial breadth by African historians. This is an argument to expand the horizons of African history beyond the lure of the colonial and postcolonial moment—the long twentieth century—and the cartographic limits of colonial balkanization—national

and racialized regional histories. The struggle to liberate African history requires a double intellectual maneuver: provincializing Europe that has monopolized universality and globalizing Africa beyond its Eurocentric provincialization. A new generation of African historians must be encouraged and trained to produce histories of Africa that are simultaneously deep and universal. The current generation of historians must build on the legacy of the previous generation that left us with the *UNESCO General History of Africa* (1981-1993). At the end of this essay, I would like to suggest the directions that such a project might take.

## Recentring Africa

The salience of the historico-epistemic question raised by Depelchin's book as to whether there can be an autonomous history of Africa, an African history outside Eurocentricism, that has confronted generations of African historians, remains. It can be argued that all the major paradigms in African history—from the imperialist and nationalist, the dependency and Marxist, postmodernist and postcolonial, feminist and environmentalist—are rooted in a Western epistemological order; they were manufactured in Euro-America and imported into Africa. As I asked in a review of the work of one of Africa's seminal historians and architects of nationalist historiography, B. A. Ogot (Zezeza 2003: 306): Are we condemned to eternal mimicry? Or are we asking the wrong question, uncritically accepting that the historical concepts we use and the very idea of history belongs to Europe, thus inadvertently surrendering our histories and intellectual souls to Europe? Are the searches for "authenticity" and "autonomy" disguised cries of capitulation for a globalized intelligentsia? Shouldn't Europe itself be dismembered, the mythical figure of Europe discarded, stripped of its universalism and provincialized. But does such an agenda consist of substituting what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) calls transition histories that cast Europe as the original site of the modern with translational histories that globalize and pluralize modernity?

In an interesting critique of my book, *Rethinking Africa's Globalization*, Leonhard Praeg (2005) provides one possible answer to the question of whether we are condemned to eternal mimicry: "Yes, but only if we allow the West to appropriate the discourse of modernity thereby damning all other developmental histories to mere mimesis. No, if we recognize this appropriation as a very modernist view of modernity itself and as the death-throws of an imperialist modernity that invented itself sacrificially—a modernity that Africa cannot mimic because, given the emergence of a global discourse of human rights, it has to articulate its modernity without recourse to sacrificial expulsion and the transcendental signifiers that would otherwise have legitimized such violence. To pursue this line of thinking requires that we tease out the ontological implications of infusing globalization discourse with a non-teleological notion of 'asynchronous modernities,' which can perhaps only be adequately theorized socioeconomically and politically with reference to world-systems theory, and ontologically with recourse to complexity theory and/or critical realism."

At stake is how Africa can transcend the alterity of negative difference embedded in Eurocentric epistemology, and whether autonomy, supremacy, sovereignty, and hegemony are possible for Africa in what Praeg (2006) calls the space-time of globalization and complex interdependence. Both may be desirable, but only the first—transcending negative difference—is possible, for Africa is already and has always been at the center of human history, notwithstanding the fantasies of Eurocentric historiography that has inferiorized African difference by turning it into a difference in time and a difference in space. Temporal differentiation is articulated in evolutionary terms and historical stages in which the West is always ahead in a social Darwinist world of linear development, initiating progressive change that others are fated to imitate. Spatial differentiation posits central and marginal places, territorializes social development—wealth and poverty—so that levels of material accumulation become measures of human worth and historical agency in which the West, once again, is not only placed at the center but its global expansion and interventions become imperative humanistic acts of magnanimity. Both forms of differentiation accord Europe an immanent teleology and turn world history including African history into an endless process of recapitulation.

Praeg suggests that complexity theory offers a way out of this unproductive impasse that is ultimately rooted in binary thinking, to ground the metanarratives of world history in a non-teleological manner, to deny the West the power of *naming* stages of human development and arrogating to itself eternal superiority. Central to this project is the deconstruction of Western modernity, in whose name the civilizational conceit and imperialism of the West are based. It can be pointed out that western modernity was not the sole creation of the West itself since its material foundations and discursive referents were derived from Europe's exploitation and encounter with the rest of the world including Africa. As Marx (1976: 915) reminded us a long time ago, Africa was very much present at the rosy dawn of capitalism, the womb from which western modernity was born: "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moment of primitive accumulation." More recently, Joseph Inikori (2002) has provided the most compelling analysis to date of the indispensable contribution of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora in the industrial revolution in England and the growth of the Atlantic economy as a whole, which served as the locomotive of the

world economic system from the sixteenth century onwards. It has also been pointed out that modernity was not confined to Europe and its global offshoots; rather there have been “asynchronous modernities” in various parts of the world, including Africa, or what some scholars call “multiple,” “new,” or “alternative” modernities (Hefner, 1998; Robotham, 2000; Gaonkar, 2001). As important as these interventions are, Europe tends to remain at the center of the analysis, they are corrective histories and critiques that leave European historical and epistemic hegemony intact.

The answer to Eurocentricism does not lie, I believe, in ever more refined autocritiques within the “Western” tradition itself, as seen in the fulminations of postmodernism, or endless critiques from its physical or paradigmatic peripheries, the province of postcolonialism, but in stripping this tradition of its universalistic pretensions and universalizing propensities, in producing new or alternative histories based on a fundamental reconstitution of world history, or what I would call human history, and the reconstruction of the provincial histories of the world’s major regions including Africa and Europe in that history. The process of reclaiming and rewriting African history needs to proceed not only through critiques of prevailing silences in western Africanist historiographies, but also vigorous reconstructions of African histories that have temporal depth and spatial breadth. This is an argument to expand the horizons of African history beyond the preoccupations of the post-colonial scholars—my generation trained in the 1960s and 1970s enamored by radical dependency and Marxist approaches and the subsequent generation trained in the 1980s and 1990s seduced by reformist, some might say reactionary, poststructuralist and postcolonial perspectives. Our temporal gaze has been fixed squarely on the colonial and postcolonial periods, while our spatial horizons have tended to be confined to ethnic and national histories, extending only occasionally to regional and continental histories.

This is not to underestimate the place and importance of colonialism in African history. The landscape of contemporary Africa in all its dimensions—political, economic, social, cultural, and ecological—is etched by the historical imprints and legacies of colonialism, although historians differ on the relative weight they might put on them. Nationalist historians of the generation of Bethwell Ogot, Ade Ajayi, and Cheikh Anta Diop were wont to reduce colonialism to a parenthesis, an episode, a digression, a footnote that altered African cultures and societies only slightly, and to emphasize continuity in Africa’s long history (Ajayi 1968; Diop 1974). They were reacting against 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 dehumanization of Africans. Not surprisingly, as clearly demonstrated by Depelchin’s book, we focused our intellectual energies on unraveling the structures and processes of oppression and exploitation that engendered this. Capitalism and colonialism became our chief culprits. And so we largely abandoned researching on (although we of course taught) the histories of Africa before the European contact and the depredations of Africa’s integration into the world system from the slave trade to colonialism to neocolonialism loomed large in our constructions of African history. The iconic representation of this historiographical tendency was Walter Rodney’s (1982) *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. We were critical of both imperialist and nationalist historiographies, but we failed to realize the depth of our intellectual debts to the 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.

It can be argued that we prepared the way for the recentering of colonialism by postcolonial scholars, in whose analyses colonialism has become the central pivot around which African history spins. Of course they are important differences of perspective and emphasis. Our radical historiographies emphasized the material and moral dimensions of colonialism, while the postcolonial scholars have tended to focus on the discursive and subjective dynamics of colonialism. Whatever misgivings and critiques those of us reared in materialist history might have about the preoccupations of postcolonial theory, and they are many (see Zeleza 2003: Chapter 5), in so far as we vigorously challenged efforts by the nationalist historians to decenter colonialism, and apparently successfully if we are to go by the large scale shift to colonial research topics, we paved the way for the triumphant recentering of colonialism by the postcolonialists. As I have argued elsewhere at greater length (Zeleza 2005), the apparent resurgence of colonialism as a focal point of African history and historical research has happened both by design and by default. By design because colonialism is the primary research problematic for the dominant scholarly paradigms of our times from postcolonial theory itself to globalization, feminist and environmental studies, all of which have, for different and sometimes conflicting and unintended reasons, focused on the processes, practices, and perceptions engendered by colonialism. It is also by default in that the further colonialism has receded into the past and the current generation of active historians is removed from its experiences, the more the colonial becomes a “historical” moment that is invested with diminishing passions of personal experience and immediacy, although debates about its meanings are no less contentious.

There can be little doubt that for most African historians today the long twentieth century looms large, itself a tribute to the presentist orientation of contemporary scholarship, which consumes most of their intellectual energies at the expense of (precolonial) histories stretching millennia that preoccupied earlier generations of historians. For Africa, indeed much of the world, the twentieth century is dominated by the structures, struggles and indelible shadows of colonialism. Colonialism will continue to be a central theme of African historical research,

but African historians need to expand the canvas of colonialism, following the trails of postcolonial theory, to encompass the imperial metropolises beyond the question of colonial policies, and show the complex and contradictory processes of mutual constitution of colonized and colonizing societies, the continuous and contested flows and counterflows of commodities and cultures, discourses and diseases, ideologies and institutions, peoples and practices, values and vices. Colonialism remade Africa as much it remade Europe. Histories of Europe need to be rewritten in which colonialism is accorded a central place. Having deconstructed Eurocentric history in Africa, African historians need to participate more actively in the deconstruction of Eurocentric history in Europe itself. The history of colonialism offers a powerful entry point, not only because colonialism conjoined African and European histories, but also because we have over the last fifty years developed the critical tools to undress the emperor. This is to argue that the postcolonial recentering of colonialism in African history only makes sense if it is accompanied by the recentering of colonialism in European history. But the project of recentering Africa goes beyond that. It requires constructing a new global history of humanity on this fragile planet.

### **Towards a New Global History of Humanity**

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 Africa is short-shrifted in two and half pages out of more than fifty pages in which the "western tradition" occupies center stage (Woolf 2005). Some concessions are made to the "Chinese tradition" and the "Islamic tradition," but it is the "Western tradition" that is fully historicized as we are undertaken with copious details about its mutation through various periods from, to use the subheadings of the article, Early Ideas of History to the European Middle Ages, Renaissance and Seventeenth-Century Europe, Enlightenment in the West, Romanticism, Historicism, and Nationalism, the "Professionalization" of History, History as Philosophy and Science, and Twentieth Century Developments and New Paths. The African Past, as it is sub-titled, appears belatedly under the last rubric, 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. The influence Islam is noted in passing; the African Islamic tradition is absorbed into the amorphous of "Islamic tradition," just as the ancient African tradition of Egypt is incorporated into the "Western tradition." Pride of place is given to what the author calls "modern Western-style historical writing. Such is the overpowering blindness of Eurocentricism, that the vindicationist Pan-African historiography of W.E.B. Dubois is whitened: "European-American historiography of Africa began," we are told, "in the nineteenth century—the celebrated American historian and civil rights activist W.E.B. Dubois (1868-1863) had provided inspiration for an early generation of black American students" (Woolf 2005: lxvi)

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 (1988, 1994) 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 "Other." African intellectual historians must reclaim Africa's historiography scattered in the various libraries, especially in the "ancient library" and the "Islamic library," and must vigorously decolonize 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 Dubois, who are often appropriated into an ever rising and everlasting Western civilization. Historiography is of course not history; it is a study of how history has been studied and produced. 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 Euro-America to Asia, led by Japan, China, and India. But power 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, 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 in 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 to 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. The popularity of world history has been influenced quite considerably by the emergence of globalization studies and diaspora studies.

Diaspora studies offer African historians a key avenue to globalize African history and contest European appropriations of global history. For example, the concept of the "Black Atlantic," notwithstanding the weaknesses of Paul Gilroy's (1993) original formulation, helped open up new analytical possibilities that recast old conceptions of the Atlantic world as some kind of Eurogenic creation. The studies that have been produced 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. As Sheila Walker (2001:2-3) has noted, until the early nineteenth century, "hence for more than three hundred years of the five-hundred year modern history of the Americas, Africans and their descendants were the Americas' largest population. Therefore, 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 organizations."

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 that seeks to investigate and examine the dispersal of African people across the globe over the last few centuries, the formation of African diaspora communities in different world regions, and the different types of linkages that these communities established and maintained with Africa. In fact, I felt that the success of the Black Atlantic paradigm had limited our horizons, that it was important to transcend the analytical tendency that privileges the Atlantic, or rather the Anglophone, indeed the American branch of the African diaspora. The project seeks to transcend these analytical limitations by mapping out the dispersal of African peoples in all the major world regions including Asia, Europe, and the Americas, and comparing the processes of diaspora formation within and among these regions and the ebbs and flows in linkages between these diasporas and Africa over time. There is abundant evidence, whose sheer volume has been a source of inestimable intellectual pleasure and some trepidation—I had no clue there was so much before I started the project—which shows African migrations and involvement in various parts of Asia and Europe during the past two millennia. Long before the Atlantic slave trade, for example, the most significant African presence in southern Europe were the Moors from northwestern Africa who occupied and ruled much of the Iberian peninsula between the early eighth century and the late fifteenth century, but they are rarely discussed in diasporic terms, as an *African diaspora*. The African dimensions of Moorish and Muslim rule in Spain and Portugal are often lost through the racialization of Africa as "black" and the racialization of Islam as "Arab," propositions that Anouar Majid (2000, 2004) has persuasively debunked. He argues that in so far as "the domain of African Islam extended as far north as Spain," Al Andalus could be considered "essentially an African kingdom in Europe" (Majid 2000: 77). This shows that Africans have not always been colonized victims, but have also been colonizing agents, which might explain the deep antipathy to Africans and Muslims in southern Europe rooted in the memories of the Andalusian era that has survived to the present.

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 and sometimes contradictory and always changing engagements with Africa, which is especially critical at this 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 increase as has been seen across Europe (most recently in the uprising in France), and so do the 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 Spain and Portugal in 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 whose effects are still with us and are central to understanding the history of Euro-America—the 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 (2000) 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 movements to 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. Our tendency to privilege the modern diasporic streams, especially the last two, is a tribute to the presentist orientation of much contemporary scholarship and the epistemic and economic hegemony of the Euroamerican world system which spawned these diasporas and created what Tiffany Patterson and Robin Kelly (2000) call "global race and gender hierarchies" within which African diasporas are situated and often analyzed. Conventional history covers only the last 5,000 years, a 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 percent of their genetic blueprint and that there are, for the 0.1 percent difference, larger genetic differences among Africans than between Africans and Eurasians (Johanson 2001; Ning Yu et Al 2002); indeed, “by far the largest amount of that variation, about 85%, is among individuals within local national or linguistic populations, within the French, within the Kikuyu, within the Japanese” (Lewontin 2005). 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 characterize 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 biohistory. “If we truly believe that ‘what’s past is prologue,’” writes Robert McElvane (2002), “the first step in the study of history should be to take account of what Edward O. Wilson, the Harvard biologist terms ‘deep history’—the evolution of the particular sort of animals we are. A historical approach that ignores biology and human evolution is actually ahistorical, because it omits the events and effects of the longest period of human existence. Yet most written history has ignored the results of human evolution. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, historians went about their studies in blissful ignorance of the findings of biology.” While conceding that historians’ wariness with biology can partly be attributed to the sad legacies of social Darwinism and the misguided determinisms of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, McElvane vouches for biohistory, 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.... Biohistory, 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.”

Long conceptions of human history offer African historians an immense opportunity to recenter 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 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 paleontology, 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 (2002) *The Civilizations of Africa: A History to 1800*. The book covers the period from 16,000 B.C.E. to 1800, broken into distinct periods. It takes long-term African history seriously and offers a bold reinterpretation of its periodization and the development of four civilizational clusters in Africa, which allows the author to discuss Africa as a whole without making untenable generalizations or resorting to racialized 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 Asia, Europe, and the Americas. In a perceptive and laudatory review, Patrick Manning (2004: 245) praised Ehret for a conducting “a useful world-historical analysis by tracing several sorts of change.” These changes include the development of cultural and material innovations, the spread of material culture, colonization (such as the Bantu and Arab migrations), interchange among the four civilizations, and the spread of material culture from external sources (such as Asian crops).

Manning himself 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 analyzing historical phenomena on a worldwide scale, that is, interactions between people organized in, or more often seen by historians as belonging to bounded cultures, civilizations, and continents. Many of the difficulties faced by world historians have centered 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 (Mazlish 1998)—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 (1998: 781-2) favors 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: Historians Create a Global Past*, Manning (2003) offers an ambitious and persuasive guidebook on how to produce more expansive world history: the need for interdisciplinarity and literacy in the humanities, natural, behavioral, 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 began 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 recenter African history by deepening and globalizing it in its temporal and spatial scope, 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 coming off 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.

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