

## AFRICA IN THE WORLD: LESSONS FROM AFRICAN HISTORY FOR WORLD HISTORY

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African history is less consistently integrated into world history than other geographical regions. World history textbooks discuss African history more now than they did a decade ago, but Africa is usually only treated in any significant detail after 1000 CE (ancient Egypt being the exception).<sup>1</sup> This is due in part, at least, to the fact that African historians have generally not situated their works and discoveries within a wider frame of world historical developments. Scholars of other regions, therefore, continue to assume that throughout its history Africa was isolated and perpetually lagging behind, thus mimicking historical precedents elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Achille Mbembe laments Africa's academic isolation, contending that:

To a very large extent, the confinement of Africa to area studies and the inability of African criticism to think in terms of the "world" go together. These two factors are crucial in explaining why the study of Africa has had such a feeble impact on the life of the various disciplines in particular, and on social theory in general.<sup>3</sup>

African history, indeed, can and should have a stronger impact on our study of history and models of historical processes because it was a place of significant historical developments and offers alternatives to the accepted narrative of the development of civilizations. In short, thorough incorporation of African history into world history changes how we see the world.

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<sup>1</sup>Elisabeth Gaynor Ellis and Anthony Esler, *Prentice Hall World History: Connections to Today* (Teachers Edition) (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997) covers little before 1500 with a focus on states and trade; Jiu-Hwa L. Upshur et al., *World History: Combined Edition* (St. Paul: West Publishing Company, 1991) covers Bantu migrations in early African history. Mounir A. Farah and Andrea Berens Karls, *World History: The Human Experience* (Teachers Wraparound Edition) (New York: McGraw Hill, 2001) also briefly covers Bantu migrations, though most attention is given to Nile Valley and West African states. Lanny B. Fields, Russell J. Barber, and Cheryl A. Riggs, *The Global Past: Volume One, Prehistory to 1500* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998) does briefly cover earlier developments, including Jenne-jeno. Yet, much more can be done to effectively use this information to inform the narratives and methodologies employed in world history.

<sup>2</sup>For example, Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995) and Robert July, *A History of the African People* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1998). Christopher Ehret's African history textbook is an important exception. Christopher Ehret, *The Civilization of Africa: A History to 1800* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup>Achille Mbembe, "Ways of Seeing: Beyond the New Nativism. Introduction," *African Studies Review*, 44/2 (2001):4.

African history has contributions to make both in terms of methodology and content. African historians have pioneered methods of uncovering history beyond the use of written sources. As Steven Feierman argued, African historians' use of archaeology, oral traditions (narratives about events that occurred before the orator's lifetime), oral history (accounts from an individual's personal experience), and historical linguistics has generated a wealth of knowledge about African history and other regions as well. These forms of research have allowed historians to learn about hitherto ignored social groups (women and children), time periods (such as the Middle Ages), and aspects of history (such as the culture of North American slaves).<sup>4</sup> The content of African history that has emerged, largely through the use of these sources, differs significantly from that in other regions of the world and challenges us to re-think some long-held assumptions and theories of historical development, such as the belief that when one ethnic group enters the territory of another, this often results in the former violently displacing the latter due to superior technology (if not intellect).

There is much to be gained, then, by trying to examine world historical events in light of African history. In this essay, I present two long-term historical processes of significance in African history before 1000 CE and explore their connections to history in other parts of the world and how they illuminate world history generally.

The first example addresses issues of urbanization, stateless societies, and trade, drawing on the recent work of archaeologists Susan and Roderick McIntosh in the Niger River delta in central Mali. Prior to their work and still persisting in most textbooks of African history, West African history centers on the savanna states of Ghana, Mali, Songhai, and Kanem-Bornu.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, world history texts tend to focus on these West African states in discussions of African history before 1500.<sup>6</sup>

There are several reasons for this focus. One is an attempt by African historians, mostly trained in the West, to demonstrate the value and validity of African history with reference to the West and its history, emphasizing the "universal" process of political hierarchy prominent in the early history of Mesopotamia and Egypt, for example. Moreover, these states were mentioned in written documents, while earlier developments were not. In the standard reconstruction of West African history, trade to the north across the desert was believed to have fueled the growth of these states, generating much of their revenue. The camel (introduced to North Africa in the first

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<sup>4</sup>Steve Feierman, "African Histories and the Dissolution of World History" in *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities*, ed. Robert H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe, and Jean O'Bar (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 167, 182-184.

<sup>5</sup>Shillington and July.

<sup>6</sup>Richard W. Bulliet et al., *The Earth and Its Peoples: A Global History, Vol. B 1200-1870* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997), 425-436. Also see the textbooks mentioned in footnote two.

centuries CE) and Islamic traders (from the seventh century CE on) were seen as the catalysts for this long-distance trade. In this view, external agents drove state growth.<sup>7</sup>

Emphasizing the various ways in which technology, disease, and foodstuffs, for example, have crossed cultural boundaries has become the staple of world history. In this way, the coming of the camel and Islam are indicators of Africa's link to the rest of the world. While such cross-cultural connections are essential for demonstrating that Africa for most of its history was not isolated from the rest of the world, the danger, as Jerry Bentley argues, is that this emphasis on cultural diffusion masks internal developments and innovations.<sup>8</sup>

In this case, cultural diffusion has concealed internal developments south of the savanna states in West Africa. The McIntoshes have focused on an area south of the savanna states known as the Inner Niger Delta (IND), particularly a site known as Jenne-jeno, and have made several significant discoveries. The first is that urbanization and trade long predated the rise of Ghana in the late first millennium CE. Centered on Jenne-jeno, they argue, was "an earlier, more completely African phase of urbanization."<sup>9</sup> Jenne-jeno existed from about 300 BCE on and reached its height in the latter part of the first millennium CE. At its height, Jenne-jeno, with its accompanying sixty-nine settlements, boasted a population of perhaps as many as 42,000 people,<sup>10</sup> and was drawn together by "a formal, intra-regional economic network"<sup>11</sup> with Jenne-jeno being the largest town and the most significant trading center:

Jenne-jeno's location at the southwestern extreme of the navigable and agriculturally productive inland delta promoted its growth as a trade center where Saharan commodities like copper and salt could be traded for dried fish, fish oil and rice produced in the inland delta, and where savanna products, including iron from the Benedougou, could be obtained with a

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<sup>7</sup>Susan K. McIntosh and Roderick J. McIntosh, "Cities without citadels: understanding urban origins along the middle Niger," in *The Archaeology of Africa: Food, Metals and Towns*, ed. Thurstan Shaw, Paul Sinclair, Bassey Andah, and Alex Okpoko (London: Routledge, 1992), 624.

<sup>8</sup>Jerry Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 19.

<sup>9</sup>McIntosh and McIntosh, "Cities without citadels," 624.

<sup>10</sup>Roderick J. McIntosh, *The Peoples of the Middle Niger* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 200.

<sup>11</sup>McIntosh and McIntosh, "Cities without citadels," 638.

minimum of overland travel in exchange for salt, copper, rice, fish and other staples.<sup>12</sup>

The site is comprised of "many separate habitation mounds in close proximity," each exhibiting an economic specialization.<sup>13</sup> For example, archaeology reveals that two sites near Jenne relied on rice and fonio (a type of grain) production in one case and millet production in another.<sup>14</sup> In other areas, sites indicate that inhabitants specialized in such occupations as cattle-keeping, iron smelting, weaving, and trading. This strategy probably was adapted in order to cope with environmental unpredictability. Rather than everyone in the area participating in the same generalized production for economic security, each group chose a particular economic activity often within a particular environmental niche but relied on the security of regional trade.<sup>15</sup> More distant trade would also have been crucial to dwellers of the IND, lacking as they were stone, minerals, salt, and fuel. Riverine trade supplied these necessities.<sup>16</sup> Local trade and indigenous economic specialization led to urbanization at Jenne-jeno. Indigenous regional trade systems, already present in Africa from early in the first millennium, such as that at Jenne-jeno, facilitated the growth of long-distance trade after the eighth and ninth centuries CE.

Not only does this evidence suggest significant urban development prior to the arrival of Muslim traders and long-distance trade, but it also encourages us to think about political and economic relationships in a different way, outside of the Western norm of state development. It is quite likely that Jenne never came to dominate the region politically as one might expect of its leading economic center. Susan McIntosh claims that their work "challenges deeply embedded evolutionary notions of complexity as differentiation by political hierarchization."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the concept of heterarchy

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 640.

<sup>13</sup>Roderick J. McIntosh, "Early Urban Clusters in China and Africa: The Arbitration of Social Ambiguity," *Journal of Field Archaeology*, 18 (1991): 204.

<sup>14</sup>R.J. McIntosh, *People of the Middle Niger*, 165.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 175, 207.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 213.

<sup>17</sup>Susan Keech McIntosh, "Pathways to Complexity: an African perspective," in *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4, 8.

describes the political relationships that have endured in the IND area over millennia.<sup>18</sup> Heterarchy refers to a complex political entity in which elements are "unranked vertically but may be highly stratified horizontally."<sup>19</sup>

Archaeological work at Jenne-jeno suggests that authority was distributed among a variety of agencies that cut across society and bound together various ethnic groups, subsistence producers, artisans, and merchants.<sup>20</sup> Roderick McIntosh suggests that most likely spatial segregation of the settlements coincided with craft specialization, as we have seen, or ethnicity, and was marked by various symbols such as dress, hairstyles, and scarification that preserved separate identities.<sup>21</sup> While Jenne-jeno was a large settlement with residents engaged in a variety of activities, the cluster of settlements around Jenne-jeno was a network of specialized production. For these urban settlements, authority would have been based on networks of reciprocity rather than persuasion. Communal memories of "extraordinary sacrifice by one group for another under conditions of ecological stress" or the "privileges of 'first arrivals'" integrated disparate communities and encouraged cooperation.<sup>22</sup> Even though some specializations, such as iron-workers, oral keepers of traditions (known as *griots*), and leather workers, would have accorded more authority than others due to their knowledge of the occult on which their work was based, even this authority was checked by competition among various occult trades and by trade among competing factions.<sup>23</sup> Social organizations also served as political associations representing various constituencies within the larger urban community. "Kinship, age sets, secret societies, cult groups, tile societies, territorial and craft associations, and power associations" had competing interests and checked the "tendency of charismatic individuals to monopolize or reinvent authority." The current archaeological evidence suggests that before the second millennium CE both economic and political activity in the Jenne-jeno region relied on "diffused authority" rather than concentrated authority.<sup>24</sup>

Intensive archaeological research in the interior of West Africa has generated enough information by now to rewrite West African history in the first millennium CE,

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<sup>18</sup>R.J. McIntosh, *The Peoples of the Middle Niger*, viii-xix.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 8-10.

<sup>21</sup>R.J. McIntosh, "Early Urban," 206, 209.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 176-181.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 229.

moving from a picture of state development driven by trade and Islam to one in which local trade among specialized producers and non-hierarchical regional urbanism are featured. Moreover, the archaeological evidence in the larger Inner Niger Delta indicates that our earlier reliance on a few written sources for the history of the Sudan has misled us. Until recently, attention focused on developments in the early state of Ghana (at its height in the eleventh century CE) with a capital at Kumbi-Saleh, as recorded by Muslim scholars such as the geographer al-Bakri.<sup>25</sup> Yet, to the south, there were dense population clusters and evidence of societies linked to the trans-Saharan trade. Jan Vansina contends, "It is now obvious that the vast IND was the demographic core and the economic dynamo of the whole region."<sup>26</sup>

In world history courses, the IND's form of economic development could be fruitfully contrasted with early developments in Egypt, Meso-America, India, China, and Mesopotamia in which political hierarchy is evident. However, more than providing a contrast with well-known early societies, this model of heterarchy is likely to be found in other regions. Susan McIntosh contends that the maintenance of multiple power relationships "may tend to emerge among food-producing peoples where agricultural land is relatively abundant, a condition that persists in large parts of sub-Saharan Africa," and was certainly the case for much of the continent in earlier times.<sup>27</sup> It is quite possible, she continues, that these various forms of social organization used to be much more widespread in the world. In fact, Roderick McIntosh argues that from the third millennium to the first millennium BCE in China, early urbanization was a process of "regional transformation by which a rural landscape of undifferentiated villages and hamlets with homogeneous populations transforms into a settlement network" with population centers to which specialists were drawn.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, Jenne-jeno's form of urbanization exemplifies the challenge that Africa presents to widely-held concepts, such as civilization, that are inherent in the Western-born discipline of history. Often historians reduce civilization to a checklist, including the presence of social, economic, and political stratification, intensive agricultural production, long-distance trade, and a form of writing, among other attributes. It is all too easy then for the components of civilization to become a formula devoid of a particular historical context. As we have seen, Jenne-jeno had dense population settlements that did not lead to the development of political or economic hierarchy and

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<sup>25</sup>Shillington, 84-85.

<sup>26</sup>Jan Vansina, "Historians, Are Archaeologists your Siblings?" *History in Africa*, 22 (1995): 369-408.

<sup>27</sup>Susan K. McIntosh, "Modeling political organization in large-scale settlement clusters: a case study from the Inland Niger Delta" in *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 22.

<sup>28</sup>R.J. McIntosh, "Early Urban," 208.

possessed elaborate local trade networks without any system of writing. Similarly, Igbo (in modern-day southern Nigeria) until recently worked the land with hoes, were engaged in local and, by the nineteenth century, international, trade, all without political hierarchy or writing.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, by examining Jenne-jeno as a regional area, its urbanism and development are more clearly explained. Similar regional research in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and northern China has demonstrated the unique circumstances of development in each case instead of trying to meet the civilization formula. These examples invite us to "transcend entrenched traditional interpretations" of the fundamental processes of human history.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, early East African history challenges other traditional historical interpretations. Much of this region's history of the first millennium CE also concerns societies without political hierarchy, but another set of developments merit our attention. Two thousand years ago, speakers of the four main continental language phyla (Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, Afrasan, and Khoisan) populated the interior of Eastern Africa (including modern-day Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, and Tanzania), making it by far the most linguistically diverse area on the continent. In contrast to this early diversity, from 1500 CE on, Bantu speakers (belonging to the larger Niger-Congo language phylum) and Nilotic speakers (belonging in the larger Nilo-Saharan language phylum) became dominant. Reconstructing the events of the intervening 1500 years has been challenging.

The region is totally devoid of written evidence before the mid-1800s. Scholars in the past characterized this lacuna as a serious problem that could only be partially overcome with the use of other evidence.<sup>31</sup> Yet, as is often the case, exploring non-traditional evidence has yielded unforeseen rewards. Talented historians have mastered the techniques of historical linguistics and learned to interpret archaeological reports in order to write a history of the East African interior. Linguistics has been especially valuable. Borrowed words signal the meeting of distinct peoples and one of them borrowing activities, ideas, or beliefs from the other. Historians deduce economic, social, and political differentiation through the development of distinct languages. How all four language groups shaped Eastern Africa and how these many distinct peoples interacted has enormous consequences for understanding cultural contact throughout world history.

In his essay, "World History and the Rise and Fall of the West," William McNeill explored the role of linguistic and cultural contact in world history. He argues that

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<sup>29</sup>Feierman, 177-178.

<sup>30</sup>R.J. McIntosh, *Peoples of the Middle Niger*, xviii.

<sup>31</sup>G. Mokhtar, ed., *General History of Africa: Ancient Civilizations of Africa*, abridged edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 313.

change in human history has occurred largely as a result of language that initially allowed the sharing of feelings and meaning within a community. Most differences in human community until about 10,000 years ago, he contends, would have been due to adjustment to climate and landscape. After that, rather than changes in the environment, "relations with neighboring human bands" were the "principal occasion for innovation."<sup>32</sup> He continues:

This, in turn, made connections with strangers, who possessed different skills and ideas, critically important. Communities that reacted by borrowing useful skills and ideas, and then knitting new and old ways together by suitable invention, tended to expand their ecological niche, increasing both power and wealth. Those that clung fast to familiar routines tended to be left behind and survived only by retreating to marginal environments.<sup>33</sup>

What scholars have pieced together of early East African history is a testament to the mingling of peoples and ideas with the adoption of certain ideas and techniques that led to a better way of living in a particular area. McNeill adds that "The main shifts of global history have arisen from encounters with strangers bearing new ideas, information, and skills."<sup>34</sup> Early East Africa is one place where this process is well-illustrated.

East Africa is the site of some of the earliest evidence for human history; different humans have likely occupied much of the region for millennia. Significant linguistic evidence, though, is only available for the last four thousand years or so. At the beginning of this period, hunters and gatherers from one or more linguistic groups (Khoisan and possibly Nilo-Saharan) occupied the region.<sup>35</sup> Southern Cushitic speakers (belonging to the Afrasan language phylum) began moving into northern Kenya (from Ethiopia) about 3000 BCE. Nilo-Saharan language speakers, particularly Central Sudanians and Eastern Sahelians, began to occupy the Western Rift valley and Great Lake areas (today this area is part of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda,

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<sup>32</sup>William McNeill, "World History and the Rise and Fall of the West," *Journal of World History*, 9/2 (1998): 216.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 220–221.

<sup>35</sup>James L. Newman, *The Peopling of Africa: A Geographic Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 36–39. Two scholars have recently challenged the widely held view that Khoisan speakers were the original inhabitants of Eastern Africa. John H. Robertson and Rebecca Bradley, "A New Paradigm: The African Early Iron Age without Bantu Migrations," *History in Africa*, 27 (2000): 295.



Rwanda, and Burundi) by 2000 BCE.<sup>36</sup> Bantu-speakers were the last to arrive after 1000 BCE.

By examining loan words in Bantu languages spoken in East Africa today, we can conclude that Central Sudanic speakers brought with them knowledge of sorghum and millet cultivation. The word for finger millet, *\*-lo*, in Bantu languages around the Great Lakes region of East Africa is not found in ancestral Bantu languages, nor is there evidence that it was internally innovated from Bantu words in use at the time. A similar term, *Do*, however, is found in Central Sudanic languages spoken today, indicating that Bantu speakers learned the word *\*-lo* and the knowledge associated with growing finger millet from their Sudanic neighbors.<sup>37</sup> Similar linguistic evidence demonstrates that sorghum, *\*-pu*, came from Central Sudanic languages.<sup>38</sup> Millet and sorghum remained staple crops for many Bantu speakers until the most recent century. Eastern Sahelians introduced Lakes Bantu speakers to cattle with the accompanying word, *\*-ka*. Earlier, Eastern Sahelians introduced Mashariki Bantu speakers to new ideas regarding livestock, as witnessed by words for livestock fence and pen, and agriculture, reflected in terms for the cutting of vegetation prior to cultivation and flour.<sup>39</sup> In other areas of the Great Lakes, Southern Cushitic speakers introduced Bantu-speakers to cattle-keeping and the bleeding of cattle.<sup>40</sup>

Southern Nilotic speakers, who came to dominate western Kenya and northwestern Tanzania, moved into Kenya in the ninth century BCE. They were keepers of livestock and farmers of millet and sorghum. It is probable that Eastern Cushites (coming from Ethiopia and belonging to the Afrasan language phylum) introduced circumcision, clitoridectomy, cycling age-sets, and age-grades to Southern Nilotes.<sup>41</sup> Age-sets were groups of youth and men who had been given a name when they were circumcised and initiated together. Their particular name was part of a cycle of names that recurred after several generations. Originally there were eight age-set names. Age-grades are stages of life with ascribed tasks, such as cattle herding. Boys of approximately same age (in this case, an age-set) moved together from one stage (or

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<sup>36</sup>Ehret, *Civilizations of Africa*, 122–125.

<sup>37</sup>David Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15<sup>th</sup> Century* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998), 9.

<sup>38</sup>Christopher Ehret, *An African Classical Age: Eastern and Southern Africa in World History, 1000 BC to AD 400* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia; Oxford: James Currey, 1998), 49.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 43–61.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 62–63, 85–87.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 162–164.

grade) of life to another while assuming joint responsibility for their duties. Circumcision and the accompanying initiation ceremony would bring together male youth from multiple kin groups, linking many people over a wide landscape together. Having experienced significant psychological, emotional, and physical challenges together as adolescents, these youth would have bonds with one another and be expected to remain loyal to one another for the remainder of their lives.<sup>42</sup> To this day, Nilotic initiations and age-grades are one of the distinguishing characteristics of contemporary East Africa in contrast to the rest of the continent.<sup>43</sup>

Scholars who work with historical linguistics in both Eastern and Central Africa argue that the eventual dominance of Nilotic speakers in Eastern Africa and Bantu speakers in both areas was due to the newcomers absorbing the earlier settlers.<sup>44</sup> Bantu speakers hunted and gathered, cultivated yams, and kept goats as they moved from Central Africa to East Africa in the first millennium BCE. In East Africa, they adopted both cattle-keeping and grain agriculture, the former from contact with Cushitic and Eastern Sahelian speakers, the latter from contact with Central Sahelian speakers. In addition, from at least 900 BCE on, Bantu speakers worked iron, a skill they possibly learned from Nilo-Saharan speakers.<sup>45</sup> Some Bantu speakers, neighbors to Nilotic speakers in southwestern Kenya and northwestern Tanzania, gave age-sets a more prominent cultural role than previously as a means of facilitating cooperation between more distant peoples.<sup>46</sup> Developing a combination of economic strategies enabled them to live successfully in almost any environment and eventually to carry their successful economic package to southern Africa. Moreover, their diverse economic toolkit led to population growth that was likely augmented by strangers moving to their settlements and marrying there. Therefore, Bantu speakers were able to effectively maintain stable population settlements. These population centers would be attractive to peoples who were transhumant cattle-keepers (moving seasonally with livestock between one or more camps) or hunger-gatherers because they could be places of refuge in times of trouble or attractive places to seek a spouse. Nilotic speakers' adoption of age-sets and age-grades with accompanying initiation ceremonies and surgical operations, such as

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 133.

<sup>43</sup>Newman, 158–177.

<sup>44</sup>Derek Nurse, "Languages of Eastern and Southern Africa in Historical Perspective" in *Encyclopedia of Precolonial Africa: Archaeology, History, Languages, Cultures and Environments*, ed. Joseph O. Vogel (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 1997), 171; Jan Vansina, "New Linguistic Evidence and the 'Bantu Expansion,'" *Journal of African History*, 36 (1995): 192.

<sup>45</sup>Ehret, *An African Classical Age*, 14–16.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 155–158.

male circumcision, produced alliances with people outside of their kin networks and mobilized youth for defensive or ritual purposes. In this way, they would have had an advantage over transhumant cattle-keepers who did not employ these forms of organization.

What is worth emphasizing to students is that the process by which Bantu speakers and Nilotic speakers became dominant was a long one, occurring over several millennia, and not initially marked by significant inequality. The oral traditions maintained by Bantu-speaking peoples in Central Africa, for example, attest to the essential role hunter-gatherers played as teachers in the new environment. The oral traditions recall hunter-gatherers as the original inhabitants, extolling them as teachers and healers possessing knowledge of local medicines.<sup>47</sup> In this light, early Bantu and Nilotic speakers were not in any way inherently superior as they entered these new environments but dependent on the earlier inhabitants as they adapted. Their survival initially depended on the peoples settled there. Nor were Bantu speakers the only ones who learned new skills. Jan Vansina, John Robertson, and Rebecca Bradley argue that it is likely that the original inhabitants learned technologies from Bantu-speakers and adopted their language, thus accounting for some of the growth and diffusion of these skills and languages.<sup>48</sup> In time, however, the combination of skills of grain farming and livestock-keeping, as well as novel forms of social organization, allowed Bantu-speakers to live in more compact and permanent villages than the autochthons.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, their languages and rituals became the ones that dominated the region as their numbers and prosperity grew.<sup>50</sup>

Cultural diffusion, or intercultural borrowing, contrasts with earlier notions of invasion by superior, iron weapon-wielding peoples. Similarly, Bantu speakers' dominance of much of sub-Saharan Africa was explained, until recently, as the result of large-scale migration made possible, in part, by possession of iron weapons.<sup>51</sup> As Vansina recounts, the accepted wisdom was that

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<sup>47</sup>Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 56–57.

<sup>48</sup>Vansina, "New Linguistic," 190; Robertson and Bradley, 308.

<sup>49</sup>Evidence of increased disease in dense settlements and the risks associated with agriculture contests the common view that agriculture led to permanent settlement and population growth. Robertson and Bradley, 314–317; Newman, 57–59.

<sup>50</sup>Vansina, *Paths*, 57.

<sup>51</sup>Vansina, "New Linguistic," 173; Robertson and Bradley, 287.

The unvarying success of these Bantu migrants came to be attributed to a vast technological differential: they were sedentary, they were potters, they were farmers, and later metallurgists, while the autochthions were just nomadic foragers.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, because of flawed linguistic data, authors assumed the migration took place in one wave over several hundred years. While historical evidence has discredited such explanations for Nilotic and Bantu dominance, they have not as yet disappeared from history texts.

We can therefore conclude that instead of crossing the continent with an appreciable technological advantage compared to those they encountered, Bantu and Nilotic speakers entered Eastern Africa lacking the necessary toolkit to thrive. They adapted and learned from hunter-gatherers, Central Sudanic, Eastern Sahelian, and Cushitic speakers. Even though the populations of Central Sudanic and Cushitic speakers in East Africa are currently quite small, their historical legacy is large and can be traced through the words modern-day speakers use to describe some of their most important economic and social activities. Thus, East African history before 1500 CE is not a story of conquest but of communicating with, being reliant upon, learning from, and intermarrying with those from other cultural and linguistic groups in order to better adapt over the long run.<sup>53</sup> Historical linguistics research in Eastern Africa has yielded a rich picture of interaction over 3000 years.

This evidence from Eastern Africa can be compared with other regions in world history.<sup>54</sup> One example is the current rethinking of Indian-Aryan interaction between 1500 and 500 BCE on the Indian sub-continent. Instead of viewing Aryans as violent conquerors, scholars are emphasizing their interactions with local peoples and their borrowing of local cultural ideas. Indian loan words found in the language of the Aryan speakers and in their adoption of certain religious practices, such as yoga, indicate this learning and interaction.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, recent scholarship on religious interactions along the Silk Road (linking the Middle East and India with China) suggests that for 2000 years Silk Road traders transmitted multiple religious traditions such as Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and various forms of Christianity to inhabitants of the region. Central Asia during this period, much like Eastern Africa, was an area of cultural fluidity in which

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<sup>52</sup>Vansina, "New Linguistic," 189.

<sup>53</sup>Newman, 158–177.

<sup>54</sup>I wish to thank Jan Bender Shetler for suggesting the following two comparisons.

<sup>55</sup>Fields, Barber and Riggs, 101. See also Romila Thapar, *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1108–1140.

multiple religious traditions co-existed, building on earlier cultural and religious elements, creating new syntheses.<sup>56</sup>

In Eastern and Western Africa, we can see that archaeological and linguistic evidence brings forth different models of historical processes that can fruitfully illuminate the history of other regions. Dense settlements linked to each other by heterarchy are evidenced by the early growth of the Inner Niger Delta. In the interior of Eastern Africa, peoples of distinct backgrounds came together over several thousands of years, learned from and lived with each other, and created new economic and social syntheses, utilized by Bantu and Nilotic speakers who carry their debt to these other societies in their vocabularies.

What these two examples demonstrate is that our historical research, to date, has been unnecessarily impoverished by an over-reliance not only on Western history but also on concepts of Western history as constructed by nineteenth and twentieth-century Western historians who relied on written evidence and paradigms based on centralized states, development, progress, and technology that neglected most regions of the world. As it becomes increasingly clear that we are overexploiting the world's resources to maintain our current brisk pace of economic growth and have not "outgrown" ethnic conflict, we very well might be faced with the need to find alternate ways of organizing our political, social, and economic systems. If we rely on models derived largely from the industrial West, then we are seriously handicapping ourselves in terms of how we might construct our future. How are we to envision a different future if we do not have different models of the past to draw on? As teachers of African and world history, we can and should make available to our students alternative models of historical development by acknowledging the lessons of African history, as we integrate them into a global context.

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<sup>56</sup>Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).