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HIST 1218: Introduction to Sub-Saharan African History to 1800

September 10th, 2015

A Dark African Safari:
The tribal Masai shadow in the primordial Congo

No region is thought about with as little nuance as Africa. Whether it is accused of being primitive or praised as idyllic, these descriptions stretch from Mediterranean to the Southern Ocean, and from Indian to Atlantic. There is no time to break Africa into regions, or much less, individual nations or peoples to be studied. The whole of the continent is painted one way or another based on the writer's point of view. This tendency is understandable: the educational system seems to think Africans sprung into existence with the Conference of Berlin, with nothing of note occurring before European intervention. Such are the obstacles that must be overcome when writing about Africa: lack of information surely poses a challenge, the primary difficulty is bias from the writer – whether positive or negative.

Lack of clearly defined source materials create a major problem for the study, and hence communication, of African history. Due to environmental challenges, Africa never gained the population centers necessary for writing to be developed independently. Although written records are by no means a perfect view into the past, they still provide a clearer picture than the alternative methods available. Interviews provide a basis of information, but are limited by the memory and point of view of the one telling the story. Oral histories fare even worse the farther back in time they go, making it hard to piece together histories from centuries or millennia ago. In these cases, archeology can be useful, though this can be a logistical challenge. The difficulty in uncovering African history is often conflated with Africa not having a history, a perception that haunts written

analysis of the continent (Lecture August 27th, 2015). An unfortunate consequence of this, combined with eurocentrism, is that African history is taught as only an afterthought in a standard history curriculum. Without the historical perspective on Africa and its many distinct nations, people tend to generalize the continent.

Historically, bias has played a huge role in non-African, particularly European, perceptions of the continent. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, European powers divided nearly all of Africa up into imperial holdings. Such an enormous undertaking required immense justification that leading figures of the time eagerly provided under the guise of enlightenment thought. Africans were said to be evolutionarily inferior based on cranial measurements, and European philosophers and poets labeled bringing so-called civilization to Africa as the “White Man’s Burden.” Until recently, African history was thought to be an oxymoron, an extraordinary insult to any group of people (Lecture August 27th, 2015). This perception carries on into the present day, where Africa is viewed as a place that “failed to develop” (Gilbert and Reynolds 2012, xxii). Such terminology is still in use; too often are impoverished nations labeled as undeveloped and too often is that label spread across all of Africa haphazardly, ignoring the host of socioeconomic diversity.

With imperialism now mostly in the past, Africa is left with perceptions and stereotypes that make analysis of the continent difficult. The old idea of African inferiority has decreased in scale, but in its place a whole host of other viewpoints about Africa have arisen. Several large wars, like the Biafran War and the Second Congo War have rocked some countries and captured worldwide media attention. This has led to the stereotype that all across Africa there are child soldiers and brutal warlords and that no place is safe. Hand in hand is the perception that Africa is universally plagued by starvation, drought and poverty (Wainaina 2006). These stereotypes can be dangerous because some start to view African woes as intractable without western intervention, robbing Africans of the agency so fundamental to humanity. It is like a modern version of the “white man’s burden,” in

which Africa is so fundamentally broken that only an outside, civilized force could ever fix it. On the flipside is the perception that Africa is full of untouched landscapes and magnificent creatures, which are too often given more character development than the human characters (Wainaina 2006). But this perception too is unfair to Africa, because it minimizes the diverse problems people struggle with all over the continent.

The first mistake commonly made when addressing Africa is just that: trying to compress a diverse set of regions into a single box. This is often done out of ignorance. After all, everyone knows what France is like, but far fewer can say anything about Nigeria. It is much easier to skirt the details treat the continent as one entity. After that, the writer merely has to choose which flavor to use when portraying Africa. It could be the uncivilized continent that 20th century Europeans described, or the war-torn mess that fills modern media. Any one of these stereotypes robs Africans of their unique cultural and ethnic experiences, but also takes away some of their humanity. Life is made up of the tedious bits: the everyday moments of which so many writers imagine them incapable.

Works Cited

Gilbert, Erik, and Jonathan T. Reynolds. 2012. *Africa in World History: from prehistory to present*. New Jersey: Pearson

Wainaina, Binyavanga. 2006. "How to Write about Africa." *Granta*, January 19. Accessed September 9, 2015. <http://granta.com/how-to-write-about-africa/>.