
Framing Africa's Historical Context

by George N Njenga

1. Introduction: Framing Africa's Geographical Space

1.1 The Global Perspective

Although each day brings us newer information about our past it is worthy to document African pre-history as it is today. According to Ayele (2007), the ancient African past, in its broadest sense, refers to deeds and events documented, through oral or written traditions, by peoples of Africa or African descent from the earliest, in African time..."¹ But what is Africa? Africa is a continent made of 54 countries (or 56 countries if we include the French territories in Africa Reunion and the Comoros) with an area approximately of 30.3 million Square Kilometers.² When this article was written the approximate total population was 935 million people. Africa is perceived as the 'last' continent because of its poor economic performance. According to the most current data available in the Central Intelligence Agency, World Factbook, Africa is currently contributing nearly 4% of the World level of Gross Domestic Production (taking into account the Purchasing Power Parity). When this article was written, data from the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States of America showed that the average per capita income for Africa was approximately USD \$4,100 p.a. with Equatorial Guinea, having the highest per capita income at just over USD \$ 30,000.³

1.2 Structuring Africa

Due to its varied geography, history, demography, governance and economies, Africa is often perceived as a divided continent. A common division of the continent, and that which I would prefer to use in this article, would be based on economic and geographical affiliation and social-demographic composition. In this case most authors have divided Africa into; Northern,

¹ Bekerie, A., The Ancient African Past and the Field of Africana Studies: *Journal of Black Studies*, 2007, Vol. 37, No.3, Pp. 445.

² Cfr. Central Intelligence Agency, Source: Feb 21, 2009; World FactBook: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications>
³ Cfr. Central Intelligence Agency, Source: Feb 21, 2009

Western, Central, Eastern and South confederations. This does not mean that the appropriate structure here elaborated is a perfect outline of the divisions. For instance, countries in the central, eastern and southern Africa at various points in time have entered into economic relations with each other.

1.2.1 Northern Africa

Northern Africa is made up of 6 countries, Egypt at the furthest Northeastern end, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Western Sahara and Morocco at the Northwestern end. Western Sahara is still in dispute between Morocco and Mauritania after Spain moved out last century. These countries were historically very close to their northern neighbors, Lebanon, Palestine, Arabia and Mediterranean Europe. As long history has been, its political, social and economic history is entwined with that of its northern neighbors. Egypt was one of the primeval world civilizations together with the civilizations of the Sumer region and that of yellow river civilization. It was the first African region to be Christianized in Africa; it was colonized by the Muslims from Arabia in the 7th century and since then it has a strong Muslim presence. For example, Egypt and Sudan are seen as part of the Arab League of Nations.

1.2.2 Western Africa

Western Africa on the hand is often considered as comprising 17 countries. Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, The Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. These countries are located west of Chad in the east, boarder the Atlantic coast on the west and south of the Sahara desert. Another region generally considered as the central region of Africa is given the same name, Central African Region. It is made up of 10 countries, namely, Equatorial Guinea, Botswana, Gabon, Angola, Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, Chad, Zambia, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo.

1.2.3 Eastern Africa

The Eastern African countries are made of 17 countries. If we were to include two French territories affiliated to Africa, they would be 19. For the purposes of this paper both Reunion and the Mayotte Islands will be considered as part of the 'Eastern African territory' for the purposes of historical outline. The reader may note that the Mayotte Islands, located between the Northern end of Madagascar and the coast of Mozambique, are a disputed territory between the Comoros

and the French Government. The other 17 countries that make up Eastern Africa include, Seychelles, Mauritius, Djibouti, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Comoros, Madagascar, Uganda, Mozambique, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Malawi, Eritrea, Somalia, Burundi, Zimbabwe⁴.

1.2.4 Southern Africa

Finally, there is the Southern African region which is made up of 5 countries all very closely affiliated to South Africa. They are; South Africa, Namibia, Swaziland, Lesotho. Both Swaziland and Lesotho are geographically surrounded by the South African territory. Namibia's economy is almost entirely dependent on the South African economy.

In our current history, it is this region one refers to Africa. Geographically, it lies between the southern limits of the Sahara and the northern limit of the Kalahari Desert or River Limpopo in the south. Despite this seeming homogeneity, Sub-Saharan Africa is made up of a variety of nations (often referred to as tribes, to differentiate them from their contemporary world of 'nations'. It is a matter of semantics) and peoples with significant historical, socio-political ethnic and religious disparities. Sub-Saharan Africa may be divided according to its inherent disparities, between Western Africa, Central Africa and Eastern Africa.

2. The Meaning of African History

2.1 History as a Discipline

In order to frame Africa's historical context it is expedient that we understand the meaning of history as a discipline. History is a word that conjures up both the past experiences of man and his environment while at the same referring to the documentation of these same past actions. Among many definitions, the word history has a Greek etymology, meaning, to inquire with a certain sense of curiosity.⁵ Three questions immediately come to mind; first, what is the nature of that which we refer to as historical? The Second question concerns the way in which societies and cultures develop over time, given the rate of change in human development. Third, concerns what knowledge does man get from his past? It should not be that this knowledge just disappears since history provides man, if there is correct data, with the possibility of understanding his present and his future given his past experiences. If this were not the case man will become

⁴ Cfr. Central Intelligence Agency, Source: Feb 21, 2009

⁵ Fernández, L. S., *Universal Historia*; Eunsa, Pamplona, 1979, Pp. 23 - 28

deformed, sheltering myths, feelings or prejudices. Putting it in another way man will not remember the wisdom gained over time and therefore will not make use of it. This would be a grave weakness in the sense that it would retard man's development.

2.2 Cultivating History

For this reason there exists a tendency to interrogate historians about the future. Many still think that those who "*cultivate*" history should be make forecasts of the future. This certainly is not the case, since the future requires new knowledge in addition to past knowledge and new knowledge is more proper to the field of the natural, philosophical and theological sciences in their entire ambit. The historian must, under pain of discipline, restrain himself or herself to providing adequate data of human past experience. Why human? Humans are the only rational beings on earth able to accumulate historical data for their own knowledge and development. Man on the other hand can deny historical precedents. He has the freedom of forsaking the past for the simple reason that man's history is strewn with both great deeds and miseries; and, while he is able to glory on the great deeds, he probably would like to forget or deny the miseries.

Fredrick Nietzsche would have us look for consolations thinking that the process of decay in our cultural experiences is biologically inevitable and inexorably so as their own death is. The Marxist would like to perceive history through the eyes of matter and the struggle against the alienating classes in society. But the reality is that history must encompass all human realities of the past in as much as it can. Marxists locate their peculiar vision of the original sin in a very advanced moment of human history, the Neolithic one, when private property appeared and men divided themselves into antagonistic classes condemned to fight against each other until the suppression of the classes. This to them is the current and future situation of humanity. Positivism on the other hand ignores any relation between immanence and transcendence. To them progress is inexorably "a natural" line, that is fulfilled irrespective of the will of man, and this can be expressed as; "the wiser the richer and the richer the happier". For the positivist therefore, history is ultimately irrelevant, save for the sake of curiosity. As Fernandez explains, historical reality is based on two forms of behavior: Repetition, characteristic of the physical world, and succession, characteristic of the spirit. In regard to his freedom, he makes decisions that affect his somatic condition and the ecosystem within which he lives. Nevertheless, he is not

born alone, but is inserted into a culture and almost all the knowledge he handles comes to him as an inheritance from the riches of other men.⁶

2.3 Foundations of Human Historical Studies

We can therefore say that history is useful for man in as far as it helps him accurately capture and understand his past encounters, both material and spiritual, as a foundation for the construction of his future in every sense of his being. Thus, history has to be incorporated into every aspect of human life. However, for the purposes of this paper we restrict ourselves to the social, political and economic aspects of history. It is preferable to leave the history of other aspects of human life to their respective fields of study; be they natural sciences or philosophy or theology.

In addition, it seems to me that in the understanding the purpose, meaning and nature of history one cannot entirely nourish his mind only from the material natural scientific explanations, such as the sciences based on the Darwinian theory of evolution. M. Artigas and D Turbón (2008) explain Socrates idea that the material natural sciences cannot explain everything.⁷ Historical studies have used many natural material sciences to observe the past. Among these are Anthropology, Archeology, genetics and hermeneutics. This is because man is not purely somatic or even psychosomatic, that is, man is not purely material or corporeal and not also purely an intelligent material creature. He is also spiritual; he has a spiritual reality through which he conscientiously makes decisions about his current and future actions; he is not merely motivated by material stimulate and least of all by a mechanical cause effect relationship. Man makes decisions primarily, ethically, and this involves a moral dimension outside the ambit of material natural sciences. This other aspect of man makes us understand that while we remain very perplexed about the recent successes of material natural sciences in their latest discoveries, especially in the genetic field, there is a transcendent aspect of man beyond his somatic condition. This aspect is the studied more specifically in the fields of natural philosophy and theology, that is, in the sciences that deal with metaphysical and supernatural realities of human nature and life. However, the three spheres of knowledge are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, scientists have to keep advancing their knowledge of the thin line existing between them without subsuming each other's competencies.

⁶ Fernández, L. S., *Universal Historia*. P 24.

⁷ Artigas, M. and Turbón, D., *Origen del Hombre, Ciencia, filosofía y Religión*; 2ª ed. Eunsa: Pamplona, 2008, Pp. 25-26

3. Contextualizing African History

3.1 Another Perspective from Africa

A critical study on the historical literature and writing on African history evokes a panorama of a vast continent and history. It therefore becomes very difficult, that is, almost impossible to condense a credible African history. Yet, the African historical perspective should be documented bearing in mind; first, an integrative sense of continuity and development based on a sound interpretation of African historical space; secondly, contextualizing African history within the historical experience and frame of its contemporaries in each period; that is, providing a succinct, somewhat global, continuity with the rest of the world; thirdly, recounting Africa's historical development as affected by the "westernization" and European expansion; and lastly, observing African history in the eyes of the person from Africa. As Ayisi Bekele points out, there is a need to "pursue an African philosophy of history, that is, a vision and interpretive scheme to critically reflect on the historical field of concern."⁸ It seems that there has been an overzealous desire to emancipate Africa from the context of world history in the recent past. That is, to give Africa its appropriate autonomy and dignity, away from the colonizer's (or one seen as such) perspective.

3.2 Africa is a Part of the Whole

It is my view that neither one nor the other is appropriate. Africa's history must be seen as one other historical experience in the world. The African continent has experienced relationships with other parts of the world and has been affected by other peoples, outside its space. As all the historical narratives show, Africa is not an isolated island. Its people have influenced Europe, America, and the Far East, albeit, at different levels of implication, but nonetheless, influenced. The fact that many people from Africa have suffered enslavement for at least 500 hundred years, colonization at various points in their history culminating in the general independence struggles of African peoples and states approximately 40 years ago, has had a demoralizing effect on the dignity of the African, as a black person. Here, black person, refers to the dark skin-color as opposed to the prevalence of the whiter skin in the north or yellowish in the east. The fact that Africa is the "last continent" from an economic perspective, currently containing most of the world's poorest countries, also seems to portray an "uncivilized" and "technologically

⁸ Bekerie, A., *The Ancient African Past and the Field of Africana Studies: Journal of Black Studies*, 2007, Pp. 445.

backward” people; and therefore, in need of reclaiming their rightful self-esteem in the world affairs. Finally, as though to add insult to its turbulent injurious past, corruption, poor governance and a seemingly lack of leadership has engulfed the leadership of many African countries. The effect of all these has been to make the individual educated, cultured, value-driven African person, defend his or her person, family, society, history and culture’s self-esteem before the rest of the world. To prove the African’s autonomy and self-respect academically would call for an “*emancipated*” understanding and learning of his history. Africa can learn from its history many good things by considering themselves as part of the whole, rather than an isolated part.

The radical claim that Africa need not bear the burden of submitting to the perspectives, philosophies, cultures, societies and political influences of the rest of the world, especially Europe its colonial nemesis, seems wrong. This is true simply because the African people can still learn from the positive side of her relationship with the rest of the world, regardless of the offender and the offended, the victor and the wounded, the economically inferior and the economically superior. This idea is not new. Brizuela-Garcia E. (2008)⁹, commented on the words of another historian, Terence Ranger, who accurately described the aims of African historiography in the 1970s, when he argued that African history should be relevant to the lives of African communities but also ought to be able to engage and dialogue with the discipline at large (Ranger, 1976).¹⁰ Here Ranger argues for inter-complementarities in the historical discipline. However, the same concept can be used to proffer another correct insinuation; that Africanist historiography should not conceive themselves as a project of political liberation and social development as well as a valid area of historical research. The so called Africanist Historian¹¹ must engage in the practice of dialogue and affinity with other historians to bring about an inter-relatedness that historical experience itself reveals is the reality.

3.3 Historical Space

Reiterating this notion is Fernandez’s theory of historical time. According to him there is a “historical” time or space, that is to say, history happens in the conscience not simply in a continuation of time as it is calculated by the mathematician. This time is a limitless duration, in

⁹ Brizuela-Garcia, E., Towards a critical interdisciplinarity? African history and the reconstruction of universal narratives', *Rethinking History*, 2008, Vol. 12, No.3, Pp 299 — 316

¹⁰ Brizuela-Garcia, E., Towards a critical interdisciplinarity? African History and the Reconstruction of Universal narratives, *Rethinking History*, P. 301

¹¹ *Ibid.* P. 302

the eternal scope, not merely a simple succession of the time. In this “duration” possibilities arise and in time become realities. Hence, I concur with the idea that historical space must include a universal principle and this in turn calls us to break down the imaginary walls of isolationism.

3.4 Africa Belongs to All

The African people have for centuries identified themselves with the societies that surrounded them. As Professor Miller recently commented, Scholars and teachers need to be conscious of the extent to which they can apply the Descartes’ articulated version of economic individualism - "I think therefore I am." The African socio-economic ethos rests on a much more communal identity. The African equivalent of cogito ergo sum would be closer to, "I am because I belong. We are because we belong." In this context, people represent wealth, not possessions. This means that the African concept of the "slave" differed significantly from that of the European Atlantic. The African definition of "enslavement" or "slaving" comes closer to "taken-out": taken out from one communal or social identity and "taken-in" to another. There are no direct 17th century African equivalents for Western concepts like national identity, individual equality under the law, or social and political categories of race.¹² I do entirely agree with this insight. Although, the European person has often been seen as “individualistic” in the sense that Professor Miller illustrates here, from an African perspective of communal identity, the European is still “person” enough to offer the possibility of a beneficial intellectual interaction with the African. Ultimately, the African must stop seeing in the European, a nemesis, but rather one who can offer communal belonging and sharing. The European, Asian and American must become part of the African’s world and more radically, all must participate in bridging the gap between peoples to enhance a global family. Race, color, culture and politic must cease to be alienators of people, of African against the rest or vice-versa. History must play a part in rendering the unity of persons and objectives. We must transcend the superficial differences between us and claim the highest value of co-existence and co-patronage of the gift of the earth. It belongs to all.

¹² Cuddihy C., "Joseph Miller on Africa and African Slaving, " World History, 2009
<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/whc/4.2/cuddihy.html>

3.5 Periodization of African History

Historical knowledge is a service to society. It consists, first of all, in the formulation of questions about the past and in the investigation of the answers. The questions must include all the aspects of human life. That is to say that, “the totality of History” is the wholesome understanding of past data, politics, institutions, ideologies, economies and societies of human reality; it has to be fused and integrated in order to obtain the correct explanation. The conventional European division of history is divided into four ages; Ancient, Medieval, Modern and contemporary. It was established by the European historians and merely obeys formal circumstances. It is correct for the Marxist historians to absolutely reject this idea but it should be so for very different reasons.

There remains therefore the task of identifying a frame within which to elaborate African history based on the foregoing discussions. One of the most appropriate ways of the periodization of African historical space would be to consider it into two generic time periods; the period before 1885 (the point in time of the “second” European colonization of Africa) and the Genesis of Post Colonial Africa. The first part would include; the pre-historic past (before 4000 B.C. or at the end of the Neolithic age), the Ancient African Kingdoms (4000-1 B.C.), Migrations of African Populations, The advent of Christian and Islamic influence in Africa up to 1500 A.D., African Kingdoms and European Colonization up to the 19th Century. The second part would be simply and finally The Genesis of Post-Colonial Africa. The History of Africa after the middle of the 19th century would be well served if historians would divide Africa into far smaller regions or Nation states. The reason is that at this stage the activity in the African continent is so vast and complex that to unite the histories of all the African peoples would be an injustice to its parts and its dynamism. Bekerie (2007) analyses of Richard B. Moore’s periodization of African history divided into six periods as shown in (see Table 1)¹³.

¹³ Bekerie, A., The Ancient African Past and the Field of Africana Studies: *Journal of Black Studies*, 2007, P. 452

TABLE 1 Proposed Periodization of African History Based on Richard B. Moore's Model	
Very early period	7 × 10 ⁶ million years ago–10,000 BCE
Early period	10,000 BCE–3400 BCE
Classical period	3400 BCE–300 CE
Median period	300 CE–1495 CE
Colonial period	1495 CE–1957 CE
Renascent period	1957 CE–present

Source: Bekerie, A., The Ancient African Past and the Field of Africana Studies: *Journal of Black Studies*, 2007, Vol. 37, No.3, Pp. 452

Moore very rightly considers the importance of the Pre-historical period given the importance it has lately acquired. The rest of the periodization, early period, classical period, median period, colonial period and the renascent period, shows clearly his perception of history as purely an elaboration of event over the linearity of time. This does not seem to serve the nature of man in all his capacity of action; that is, considering man as both a somatic and spiritual being capable of being affecting history by his culture and freedom. He therefore is simply considered another element in the plurality of time, unable to order his life through his freedom and spiritual capacity; he simply remains “another” within the inevitable process of evolution in the time scale. The Marxist would also see man’s historical process from a material aspect of economics. This protagonist of history would like us to see man as purely explained by the struggle between classes. I do feel that this would not be appropriate for the very same reason that Moore’s periodization is inconsistent with man’s nature.