

REVIEW ESSAY

Teaching about Africa: Homocentricity, Afrocentricity, and the Classroom

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Molefi Kete Asante. 2015. *The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge. 399 pp.

Robert O. Collins and James M. Burns. 2014. *A History of Sub-Saharan Africa*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press. 405 pp.

Maria Grosz-Ngaté, John H. Hanson, and Patrick O'Meara, eds. 2014. *Africa*. 4th ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 362 pp.

Africa is humanity's birthplace, where astonishing genetic and fossil data continue to accumulate and convince skeptics that *homo sapiens* is African. Broadly speaking, all present-day humans are descendants of some twenty thousand Africans about ten thousand generations ago. The homocentric fact that we are all Global Africans has profound implications. This provocative knowledge has the potential to convince rational humans to accept each other as extended family. Can Mother Africa reach out from our deep collective past to gently infuse our emerging minds with soothing tunes of familial empathy? To paraphrase Stephen Foster, "Oh Sankofa, oh don't you cry for us, for we come from Mother Africa with drums between our knees."

African studies and world civilization courses are educational venues where such revolutionary ideas can be discussed. These courses give instructors opportunities to inform students that the past is meaningful, that history has a purpose, and that concepts of nationality, sub-culture, ideology, religion, ethnicity, and materialism can be understood within a Global African collective. Inside such discussions the fraudulence of "race" can be exposed; "the other" can be replaced with "my cousin." To some, this homocentric foundation of education and wisdom may sound naïve, a bit idealistic, but sometimes against seemingly hopeless odds, good can emerge. The life of Nelson Mandela exemplifies this well. How different the world would be had the Afrikaner judge sentenced Madiba to death instead of life. Hope and small victories can change the world.

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v16/v16i1a4.pdf>

New editions of Africana texts by Molefi Kete Asante, Robert O. Collins and James M. Burns, and editors Maria Grosz-Ngaté, John H. Hanson, and Patrick O'Meara effectively and eloquently present Africa and its peoples to the world. For me, teaching about Africa through time is best presented within the homocentric context of African origins. The important question in my mind as I engage the authors is this: do the authors use their scholarship about Africa and their empathy toward Africans to call us to the family reunion?

In *The History of Africa*, Molefi Kete Asante strives to present African history and people through African eyes. He knows full well that most Africana was overwhelmingly Eurocentric until the 1950s. Even today, due largely to the mal-distribution of wealth on our planet, much of what is written by Africans continues to be generated by scholars from privileged societies outside the Mother Continent. Nonetheless, we have come a long way since Africanists tossed Edgar Rice Burroughs and Henry Morton Stanley into the dustbin of racism while fighting major battles with Eurocentrists Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Hugh Trevor-Roper. Asante attempts to take us further still in his valiant attempt to write African history for Global Africans from an Afrocentric perspective. Does he succeed?

Asante divides his *History of Africa* into seven helpful parts: "The Time of Awakening," "The Age of Literacy," "The Moment of Realization," "The Age of Construction," "The Time of Chaos," "The Age of Reconstruction," and "The Time for Consolidation." As each section's nomenclature implies, Africa and Africans are at the center. Asante declares in his preface that he uses the lenses of cultures, societies, politics, and economics to convey "the ordinary lives of Africans within the context of their own experiences."

For me, and through me my students, Asante's treatment of human origins and its possible implications is tantalizing, but too brief. His three pages comprising "The Time of Awakening" have neither graphs nor illustrations. Yes, there is a companion web site <<http://www.routledge textbooks.com/textbooks/9780415844550/part1.php>> with some sixteen entries in the form of a semi-active bibliography. I would much prefer Asante summarize and incorporate that data more fully into "The Time of Awakening." My provincial students of all ethnicities need more than a three-page summary to begin to weigh the enormous value of their African heritage, and they need Asante's guidance in doing so. Moving from awakening to literacy, Asante calls on the ideas of John Henrik Clarke for support, but Asante himself needs to give us more than three pages of his own words.

Asante's coverage of the history of Kemet (Egypt) is very well done, whether the topics are about Kemet's pharaohs, religion, or the people. What I found especially frustrating, however, is the book's lack of maps. *History of Africa* has one map and the companion web site has no map section. Even if maps were there, I want hard copy maps in front of me and my students. I want my students not only to feel the persuasive empathy of Asante's words, I want them also to use their eyes to find those words embedded in the Mother Continent. Very few of my students have been out of their regions of the United States, much less to Africa. Alas, some of Asante's noble work and many of my students can easily get lost.

I thoroughly enjoyed Asante's coverage of Cleopatra VII, Axum, Hannibal, Mansa Musa, Great Zimbabwe, the Yoruba, Benin, Dahomey, literature, colonialism and the independence movements, Kwame Nkrumah, and Nelson Mandela's life—just to list some of the book's strengths. Perhaps in a future edition Asante can expand his coverage of Nana Asma'u of the

Sokoto Caliphate, Ibn Battuta, the dhow, the Copts' monotheism, and the critics of Robert Mugabe. Asante's second edition is a wonderful history of the Mother Continent. It can even be more so in its third edition.

Like Asante's *History of Africa*, a second edition of Robert O. Collins and James M. Burns' *A History of Sub-Saharan Africa* has recently been published. James Burns carried out this edition's revisions, as Robert Collins passed away in 2008. Collins and Burns created a fine text on the Mother Continent and its peoples, but it contains virtually no treatment of human origins. Unfortunately, instructors must look elsewhere.

In contrast to Asante's book, Collins and Burns have some of the best maps ever produced in a text about Africa and its peoples. They clearly convey to provincial students Africa's complex geographic personality. Some of the effectiveness of this rich resource, however, is diminished by the absence of a map list in the front matter. The same can be said for the illustrations, helpful primary sources, and debates in African history that Collins and Burns share with students. *History of Sub-Saharan Africa* is divided up into four sections:

"Foundations," "Africa in World History," "Imperial Africa," and "Independent Africa." The authors chose to omit significant coverage of North Africa in order to devote more attention to "the internal integrity of Africa south of the Sahara," as explained in their introduction. Some Africanists will take issue with any book that portrays the Sahara as a barrier dividing North Africa from the rest of the continent. They would argue that such a challenge to the inherent unity of Africa is unnecessary and that inclusion of North Africa is more important than the forced exclusion of data about other parts of Africa necessary to publish the book within page limits.

Collins and Burns excel when raising controversies in African history. One fine example presents competing ideas on the origins of Egyptian civilization of Cheikh Anta Diop, Martin Bernal, Mary Lefkowitz, and Guy Rogers. Another discusses African art and coincidentally mentions the art of the Kuba, whose art is held extensively by my university and often viewed by my students. Another still discusses the origins of Great Zimbabwe. Walter Rodney's important economic analysis of the relationship between Europe and Africa is also considered. The authors provide splendid treatment of manifestations of slavery in Africa and well as the Atlantic slave trade. All the while, the authors encourage students to think for themselves.

The last work considered here, *Africa*, is a collection of essays about the Mother Continent and its peoples that focus more on contemporary than historical Africa, edited by Maria Grosz-Ngaté, John H. Hanson, and Patrick O'Meara. Unfortunately, there is even less treatment on foundational human origins and its application today than that of Collins and Burns. Twenty-two contributors combined to produce fifteen essays on a large variety of African topics, including historiography, family and community, religion, health, urban life, visual arts, music, literature, film, politics, and human rights.

As is often the case with edited works, some chapters are stronger than others. One of the strongest, which sets the foundation for contemporary Africa, but which says nothing in detail of human origins, is John Akare Aden and John H. Hanson's "Legacies of the Past: Themes in African History." I especially enjoyed Patrick McNaughton and Diane Pelrine's "Visual Arts in Africa" with its stunning representations of African art in color. Daniel B. Reed and Ruth M. Stone's "African Music Flows" is also an engaging chapter that will connect well with students.

The authors could have supplemented the important treatment of indigenous African music with a discussion of the fascinating story of Sixto Rodriguez and South Africa. Thinking of the book's undergraduate audience and linkages again, the authors could also have mentioned Youssou N'Dour's appearance in 1994 at Woodstock, where he and Super Étoile de Dakar stirringly performed their anti-apartheid tribute song to southern Africa and Nelson Mandela.

Preliminary bibliographies conclude each chapter. Especially helpful, Marion Frank-Wilson's "Print and Electronic Resources" chapter serves as the book's general bibliography. In the "General Resources" where H-Africa is mentioned, students would be further assisted by knowing that H-Africa is only one of H-Net's family of Africana listservs and web sites.

All three books have their strengths and complement each other. Undergraduate and graduate students alike will be richly rewarded by immersing themselves in these volumes. They will be rewarded further still by keeping homocentricity—the African origins of humanity—in mind.