

## AFRICA AND THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN WORLD\*

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READ 4 MARCH 2005

**ABSTRACT.** The Commission for Africa, which reported in March 2005, drew attention to the enduring problem of poverty in Africa, but also reinforced the common perception that Africa has a troubled relationship with the ‘modern world’. This essay reviews the literature on Africa’s long-term political and economic development, paying particular attention to the continent’s insertion into the global system in the period described by C. A. Bayly as the ‘birth of the modern world’. It concludes that, though many of the continent’s current problems arise out of recent policy failures, we should not ignore longer-term, structural elements of environmental, demographic and economic history, including the consequences (direct and indirect) of the slave trade.

By some accounts Africa seems to have a troubled relationship with the modern world. The Commission on Africa will report in the spring. In 2001 preparing the way for the Commission’s work the British prime minister stated that ‘Africa’s poverty is a scar on the conscience of the world.’ Recently Commissioner Geldof has gone further – ‘Africa’s agony’, he argues, ‘has been compounded by the chill winds of the globalised world, which has effectively excluded it further.’ Urging his fellow commissioners to move from ‘charity to justice’, Geldof warns: ‘If this turns out to be another anodyne and meaningless development tract, I’m out of here . . . and I will weep.’<sup>1</sup>

Whatever you make of the Africa Commission there is little dispute over the seriousness of Africa’s economic (and related social) problems. Africa is the only region of the developing world which is no better off than it was twenty-five years ago. Declining growth rates, increasing poverty, falling

\* My thanks for all the perceptive comments and criticisms of this essay made by those present at the Royal Historical Society lecture and at a later presentation at the Centre for the History of Economics at Cambridge. It will be apparent that I have drawn heavily on the incisive work of both Gareth Austin and Frederick Cooper, as well as on that of my African history colleagues in Cambridge, John Lonsdale and John Iliffe. Chris Bayly’s outstanding work inspired me to write this essay.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in ‘Africa Commission’s Uphill Task’, report by BBC correspondent Steve Schifferes, 6 Oct. 2004: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business.3682509.stm>.

life expectancy and the recurrence of conflict characterise the continent. The Commission has its work cut out.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, demonstrating that not all news out of Africa is bad news, London hosts a festival of African cultural events (Africa 05), including, of course, musical events. If you were ever any doubt about Africa's position in global culture, try and think about world music without thinking about African music. Included in Africa 05 is a major exhibition of African contemporary art at the Hayward, entitled 'Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent'.<sup>3</sup> While the deliberations of the Commission for Africa imply that Africa has been left behind as the rest of the world forges ahead economically, Africa Remix is almost relentless in its stress on Africa's modern, perhaps more accurately post-modern, condition – as a continent of cityscapes, of recycled rubbish, of modern warfare, of people struggling with a very contemporary kind of poverty. If you are looking for 'tribal art' it would be better not to go there, but if you want to see what contemporary African artists do with the continent's predicament, then do.<sup>4</sup>

I enjoyed Africa Remix, but not everyone did – including one of Britain's leading art critics – Waldemar Januszczak. In a review in the *Sunday Times* entitled 'Art: The Poverty Gap', Januszczak had little positive to say about this collection of art from Africa (though he is at pains to point out that he likes African music as much as the next man).<sup>5</sup> I was a little puzzled by the vehemence of his reactions. What, I wonder, do we outsiders expect and want from 'Africa'? While the Francophone artists come in for criticism for producing art which 'reeks of the evening class and the post-structuralist seminar', more generally Januszczak seems disturbed by the way the exhibition engages with poverty. One of the pieces he dislikes most (and there are many) is Pascale Tayou's DVD showing an African village having a road built through it: 'This isn't road-building, it's scarring. This isn't progress, it's rape.' Januszczak is far too sophisticated to call for a bit of primitivism of the old kind, but he gets close to it when he writes, 'The drab textures. The beige moods. Even those proper African artists who offer doses of authentic African insight

<sup>2</sup> The Commission reported in March 2005. The final document is published as *Our Common Interest: Report of the Commission for Africa* (London, 2005). Commentary on the Commission: Penny Jackson, 'Briefing: The Commission for Africa, Gleneagles, Brussels and Beyond', *African Affairs*, 104, 417 (2005), 657–65; Percy S. Mistry, 'Reasons for Sub-Saharan Africa's Development Deficit that the Commission for Africa Did Not Consider', *African Affairs*, 104, 417 (2005), 665–79. On Africa's ongoing economic crisis see Nicolas van de Walle, *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (Cambridge, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> The catalogue of the exhibition: *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, ed. Simon Njami *et al.* (London, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Of course, the idea that the entire continent's contemporary art could be dealt with in one exhibition, is itself revealing, as some reviewers pointed out.

<sup>5</sup> Waldemar Januszczak, 'Art: The Poverty Trap', *Sunday Times*, 20 Feb. 2005.

suffer from this heaviness. It lies, on this evidence, at the very heart of the African experience. And it makes you weep.’

Africa seems to be producing quite a bit of weeping. One would be inclined to diagnose post-colonial melancholia if it were not for the fact that Geldof is Irish and Januszczak of Polish extraction. But Januszczak’s comments point to two related issues – Africa’s very real poverty and its cultural place in the contemporary world.

I have based the title of my essay on the recent book by my colleague Chris Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1790–1914*.<sup>6</sup> In this monumental work of world history, Bayly moves away from a Eurocentric version of the period and the story of European exceptionalism, stressing instead the reciprocal interactions between events in the emerging European and North American core of the industrial western economy and events elsewhere in the world. Following much social anthropological analysis of more recent processes of globalisation,<sup>7</sup> Bayly argues that this earlier period also witnessed the spread of global uniformities (in thought, deportment, economy, religion, political organisation) which simultaneously provoked and were informed by the elaboration of cultural and social differences.

This was an unsettling period, writes Bayly, producing conflict and turmoil. This turmoil was partly produced by the unevenness of the changes outlined here, for one of Bayly’s points is that although the industrial revolution must take a central role in this story, it does not work in simple synchrony with the other developments which we associate with this period – the development of modern states, for example, and of the political ideologies which go with that. Only after 1840, argues Bayly, does the shift towards industrialisation begin to kick in at a global level, and even then not without another set of crises: rebellions in Asia, 1848 in Europe and the American Civil War. The relationships between economic change, political organisation and political ideas were complex, according to Bayly, but what can be said of this period is that

contemporary changes were so rapid and interacted with each other so profoundly, that this period could reasonably be described as the ‘birth of the modern world’ – a phrase encompassing the rise of the nation state, demanding centralisation of power or loyalty to an ethnic solidarity, alongside the massive expansion of global commercial and intellectual links.

Bayly is clear that ‘modernity’ is a state of mind as much as anything else – so that the spread of ideas and modes of living are integral to this history – not just a cultural icing to the cake.

<sup>6</sup> C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1790–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> The literature is large and growing. Bayly draws particularly on the work of Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation* (Minneapolis, 1997).

We Africanists have a terrible habit when it comes to works on world history. We scan the index to see whether Africa has been included in them at all – often the continent is barely mentioned. Bayly certainly cannot be accused of this. Africa may not loom as large in Bayly's account as other areas of the world, but nevertheless, throughout the book Bayly uses African examples to make a number of his points – about the development of the state outside Europe, for example, and the spread of the world religions and of liberal political theory and its interaction with local ideologies. But his African examples are often accompanied by quite major qualifications, and at times it seems that Africa (or most of it) does not sit very well with Bayly's attempt to de-centre the history of this period.

Let me begin with the easy bits, where Africa seems to fit best with Bayly's account. This is in the history of the religious and intellectual developments in the long nineteenth century. Expanding religions, argues Bayly, were like other major social formations of this period – the state and capitalism – in that they harnessed to themselves underlying changes in technology, and made full use of new opportunities for communication and travel. The world religions expanded outwards and 'downwards' in this period, tapping into and attempting to centralise pre-existing religious organisation and sentiment. Though part of this story is of a missionary or revivalist impulse from the centre(s), expanding outwards, it is also just as much a story of how Africans and others reinterpreted and re-fashioned the world religions to fit their needs and their imaginations. Christianity was 'converted' by Africans and Asians, writes Bayly.

In this field perhaps more than in any other, historians of Africa have long made the case for the role of African people in making or re-making the modern world. At the start of Bayly's period at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we have the extraordinary movement for the consolidation and expansion of Islam in what is now Nigeria – the Fulani jihads, or 'war of conversion', reflecting a wider movement of Islamic revival spreading from the Middle East and North Africa, but rooting itself in the specific circumstances of northern Nigeria where Fulani lineages displaced existing Hausa aristocracies and created the centralised Sokoto Caliphate. Long before the arrival of Christianity, Islam offered some Africans at least an alternative cosmopolitan connection to that of the 'West', and this connection remains an important (arguably growing) force in many parts of Africa.<sup>8</sup> After 1800 Christianity spread again in West Africa (there

<sup>8</sup> David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History* (Cambridge, 2004); *The History of Islam in Africa*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels (Athens, OH, 2000).

were earlier incarnations), and African converts took the message into the interior.<sup>9</sup>

It was here, perhaps more than anywhere else, that the globalising and modernising developments of the early nineteenth century emphasised by Bayly are most evident. Here a group of African and African-American intellectuals in the mid-nineteenth century produced a kind of African ‘renaissance’ to rival the Islamic version which had been generated by their brothers to the north. Amongst them were African-born Africanus Horton (medical doctor and political thinker), Samuel Ajayi Crowther (Anglican bishop), Edward Blyden (born in West Indies, educated in Liberia), Pierre Boilat (born in Senegal, educated in France), all contributors in their various ways to that ongoing process of exchange across the Atlantic, which Paul Gilroy refers to as the *Black Atlantic*.<sup>10</sup> These were intellectuals who perfectly exemplify Bayly’s claims for this period. They worked in a complex diasporic transnational frame (born of the forced displacement of slavery of course), they engaged with all the issues of the day – with science (including racial science), with the question of the political future of Africa, with questions of language policy, the place of women. Their contributions are well known, so I will not rehearse them all here, save to point to some of the ambiguities of this period and of its legacy – ambiguities highlighted by Paul Gilroy, Kwame Anthony Appiah and others.

These figures are incomprehensible without direct reference to the slave trade and its abolition. Saving Africa was their mission. This was understandable since all of them (African, African-American and West Indian) had, either indirectly or very directly, experienced the horrors of the slave trade and of slavery. The Christian redemptive message with which they were imbued told them that though the evils of the slave trade were perpetrated by the slavers, responsibility also rested with Africans themselves, and that it was therefore within ‘Africa’ (that entity which they helped to create discursively) that the sources of this evil were to be found.<sup>11</sup> These were not one-dimensional thinkers. They were as complex as the politics they attempted to grapple with – conservative in some ways, radical in others. Africanus Horton, for example, was deeply critical of

<sup>9</sup> On the earlier history of Christianity in the kingdom of the Kongo, see the work of John Thornton: John Thornton, *The Kingdom of the Kongo* (Madison, 1983); John Thornton, *The Kongoese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684–1706* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA, 1992); Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford, 1992); Robert W. July, *The Origins of Modern African Thought* (London, 1962); Christopher Fyfe, *Africanus Horton: West African Scientist and Patriot* (Oxford, 1972); *African and the West: Intellectual Responses to European Culture*, ed. Philip D. Curtin and James W. Fernandez (Madison, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> On the construction of ‘Africa’ see V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (London, 1994).

British policy in West Africa and proposed a form of self-rule, and he employed his scientific education to challenge the pretences of scientific racism head-on.<sup>12</sup> He, like his colleagues, believed fervently, not only in Christianity, but in the virtues of education. With enough education the African could be the equal of the white man. They all reiterated this belief. But of course the premise here was one of inequality. Their writings are graphic in their depiction of the ghastly state of the unredeemed African, a state partly produced by the debasement attendant on the slave trade – but also inherent in the pagan culture of ‘this long benighted continent’ where people were, in Crowther’s words, ‘harassed from within and without by unjust war and kidnapping, as well as by superstitious belief in the power and influence of false gods, and of the craftiness of priests’.<sup>13</sup> The Muslim Hausa and Fulani of northern Nigeria fare no better in Crowther’s book:

Notwithstanding the pride of the people on account of their flowing dresses . . . they go about in them in a most filthy and disgusting state; they are never washed from the time they are made and put on to the time they are worn threadbare, and they are the receptacles for all kinds of vermin . . . Even their ablutions are an abomination . . . a description of them would insult the pure heart of the Christian.

Crowther’s writings are designed to shock, peppered with descriptions scattered with meals of rotting meat, disease, mud and excrement. What he is describing in fact is poverty, and the poverty was real enough. But as a Victorian moralist he knew that the poverty came from within, that it was inseparable from depravity. Poverty was an insult to Crowther’s African pride, and it offended him.

At the other end of the continent, missionary competition fuelled a growth in Christian conversions in Southern Africa. By the 1870s, Xhosa Christian converts from Lovedale Institution in the Eastern Cape were volunteering enthusiastically to follow in the footsteps of David Livingstone and convert their heathen brothers and sisters in the interior to the north, in present-day Malawi.<sup>14</sup> At Lovedale where these men had been educated, the promotion of Christianity was inseparable from a thorough-going Scottish education, which included a heavy dose of the classics. For the missionaries at Lovedale a genuine attachment to ideals of universalism and equality before God was synonymous with a belief in the need for a cultural and social transformation rooted in a version of the European historical experience. These Scotsmen were not ones to compromise readily, a fact which had contradictory consequences. On

<sup>12</sup> *Africanus Horton: The Dawn of Nationalism in Modern Africa: Extracts from the Political, Scientific and Medical Writings of J. A. B. Horton*, ed. Davidson Nicol (London, 1969); James Africanus Beale Horton, *West African Countries and Peoples* (Edinburgh, 1969; first published 1868).

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Crowther, *Journal of an Expedition up the Niger and Tshadda Rivers* (London, 1855).

<sup>14</sup> T. Jack Thompson, *Touching the Heart: Xhosa Missionaries to Malawi, 1876–1888* (Pretoria, 2000).

the one hand they fought (an ultimately losing) battle against attempts to downgrade African education; on the other hand they had relatively little time for any engagement with African cultural and social traditions. This put their Xhosa emissaries in a difficult situation when charged with the duty of translating Christianity and attracting converts from among the Ngoni people of Malawi. One of them, William Koyi, was highly respected by his missionary superiors, but he also faced severe criticism when it seemed to some that his 'presents' to Ngoni chiefs were on the over-generous side. The problem which Koyi (and so many other African Christians) wrestled with in this period was that the redemptive message of Christianity also implied that Africa and Africans needed saving from themselves.

Back in South Africa Koyi's Xhosa colleague, Isaac Wauchope, was negotiating the same delicate boundaries. A committed Christian and avid member of the temperance movement, Wauchope was also a political agitator at a time when African rights (a new concept of course) were being progressively eroded and denied. He pursued his battles through his use of the pen and his literary society – the Imbumba Yama Nyama – literally meaning 'compressed meat', a reference in Xhosa to the importance of 'indissoluble unity'.<sup>15</sup> Wauchope, like some of his West African counterparts, had come to the conclusion that some kind of pan-tribal 'nation' was what was needed if Africans in South Africa were to avoid being trampled over, and that the battle would now have to be fought on intellectual grounds – using modern methods but referring constantly to Xhosa imagery. 'Fight with the Pen' was the title of one of Wauchope's poems, written in the Xhosa language: 'Your cattle are plundered, compatriot – Lay down the musket, Take up the pen, Seize paper and ink. That's your shield.' Unfortunately Wauchope's pen, and others like it, would prove an inadequate defence against the forces of settler colonialism in this part of Africa.

The Black Atlantic intellectuals and their Southern and Eastern African equivalents were in a tiny minority of course, but they had a lasting significance which survived the conservative and racist backlash of the late nineteenth century. They were involved in a complex negotiation of what it meant to be black and modern in the era of slavery and Abolition, they were central to the imagining of something called 'Africa' and they had big ideas about what to do with the continent. Theirs was a Victorian middle-class morality, married uneasily (in the case of some of them at least) to an attempt to re-value aspects of African culture. Amongst many other things, they seem to have had an unflinching belief in the godliness of clothing – unsurprisingly since slavery was so often marked by nakedness.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

And European textile manufacturers, as it happens, had their eyes on Africa as a market.

Perhaps reflecting on the contradictions of this period, Yinka Shonibare (a British Nigerian artist who was this year short-listed for the Turner Prize and whose work features in the Africa Remix exhibition at the Hayward) creates life-size headless figures clothed in the elaborate Victorian style of dress worn by the African intellectuals I have been discussing. But the raw material for their long coats and bustiers is the 'Dutch wax' printed cotton, which first found a major market in Africa in the nineteenth century and which is still popular today.<sup>16</sup> Shonibare's art 'remixes' the new bodily practices of the elite with the mass-produced cotton which for the most part was simply wrapped round women's waists or used to tie their babies to their backs. The story of Dutch wax print is in part an example of the kind of globalisation of desires and of trade which Bayly sees as so characteristic of this period. John Picton tells the story of how in the nineteenth century Dutch agency brought together Indonesian designs, West African tastes and textile industries in northern Europe, aided by a Glasgow dealer Ebenezer Brown Flemming, whose idea it was to market imitation batik in West Africa, manufactured in the Netherlands and England.<sup>17</sup> The original link came through a colour, Turkey Red. Flemming was a dealer in this dye and deep red had always been in demand in West Africa: a felted red cloth, traded by the Portuguese in the late fourteenth century, was apparently an essential element of courtly dress in Ewe/Benin, and Picton tells us that Ewe and Asante weavers were in the habit of unravelling imported red cotton cloth to re-weave the yarn. The story of Dutch wax print is then a continuation of a longer history. In the eighteenth century, for instance, West African chiefs made their desires and tastes known to European traders in Indian textiles and were extremely peeved when presented with the wrong stuff. In the 1830s, in the heart of Central Africa, hundreds of miles from any coast, King Kazembe was telling a Portuguese emissary that he did not like the kind of (Indian) cloth he had brought with him, and in any case he wanted it in rolls, not cut into pieces.<sup>18</sup> In the late nineteenth century, then, European manufacturers were quick to respond to West Africa consumer demand, not only for certain colours, but for some quite specific designs: blackboards, the alphabet, numbers, emblems of chiefly authority and designs based on the visualisation of local proverbs.

<sup>16</sup> *Yinka Shonibare, Double Dutch* (Rotterdam, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> John Picton, 'Laughing at Ourselves', in *Yinka Shonibare, Double Dutch*, 45–63; Ruth Nielsen, 'The History and Development of Wax-Printed Textiles Intended for West Africa and Zaire', in *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, ed. Justine Cordwell and Ronald Schwartz (The Hague, 1979).

<sup>18</sup> A. C. P. Gamitto, *King Kazembe and the Marave, Cheva, Bisa, Bemba, Lunda and Other Peoples...* (Lisbon, 1960).

This was an eclectic mix then, patterns which in Picton's words 'mark the Africanization of these cloths, their transformation from an exotic textile (in West African terms) to a fabric of immediate relevance to the developing local modernity of the area'.<sup>19</sup>

But this history is also, in part at least, one of the undermining of African petty commodity production; and in the longer run Africa's enduring poverty meant that it did not live up to nineteenth-century marketing expectations. African consumers do indeed continue to make their preferences known to the manufacturers of Dutch wax, and the results are not too dissimilar from those of the nineteenth century: emblems of modernity (the mobile phone for example) vie for space on the body with traditional proverbs and reminders of chiefly authority. In some parts of Africa, however, these cloths face the tough competition of second-hand clothing imported from the United States and elsewhere, T-shirts bearing slogans signs and symbols over which African consumers have no control and whose cultural referents (*despite* globalisation) are sometimes distinctly exotic.<sup>20</sup> Does it matter? I do not know.

If, as Bayly argues, modernity was a 'state of mind' and a set of bodily practices, it was also inescapably about states and about economic processes.

In his attempt to de-centre the history of the 'birth of the modern world', Bayly also de-centres, up to a point, the narrative of the role of the nation state in this process. In outlining the major features of the development of the modern European state (stable legal institutions guaranteeing property rights, the development of a national sentiment, military centralisation), Bayly also argues that these developments were (at least until the mid-nineteenth century) *not so* unique, not so different from what was going on in Africa and Asia. Here too 'more focused identities, patriotic homelands owing allegiance to wider values...formed, dissolved and reformed'.

Bayly is rightly cautious in his application of this argument to Africa. The history of pre-colonial Africa is littered with failed states as well as with more enduring and successful attempts at state building. Furthermore, most historians of Africa would want to take a step back from any Whiggish narrative to ask the prior question: what is a state for, and why, in the context of the conditions prevailing in much of the continent, assume that conditions of life under a state might be better

<sup>19</sup> For the parallel history of the demand for textiles in nineteenth-century East Africa see Jeremy Prestholdt, 'On the Global Repercussions of East African Consumerism', *American Historical Review*, 109 (2004), 755–83.

<sup>20</sup> Karen Hansen, *Salaula: The World of Second-Hand Clothing and Zambia* (Chicago, 2000).

than in stateless, decentralised polities?<sup>21</sup> I will return to this question later, but for now let me summarise what I think is the consensus about the limits of state formation in pre-colonial Africa and the related question of economic development.

If state formation is a tricky business everywhere (as Bayly points out) there is nevertheless reason to believe that it was always particularly difficult in most parts of pre-colonial sub-Saharan Africa. The argument is in essence a simple one. Africa is a large and varied continent, but over some very large parts of it population densities were historically low, due to a combination of environmental and disease factors.<sup>22</sup> With some notable exceptions (which do, in fact, prove the rule – parts of northern Nigeria, and the Great Lakes Region for example) populations were thinly spread, practising extensive agriculture over large areas and shifting settlements when soils were exhausted. The dominant social and political systems of pre-colonial Africa had evolved to meet these circumstances. As is oft reiterated, with some exceptions, labour rather than land was the scarce resource. As a consequence social, cultural and religious systems placed enormous stress on fertility. Extensive kinship systems bound people together, and political organisation (which in most places was an extension of kinship) emphasised that generosity was the price one had to pay for the exercise of any authority. Powerful chiefs aimed to gather people around them and secure their allegiance. In return they were expected to protect their subjects from enemies, ensure their fertility and the fertility of the soil and feed them in times of famine. War was no less a feature of African societies than of any other, as John Iliffe's book on honour in African history reminds us,<sup>23</sup> but much warfare in pre-colonial Africa was directed at absorbing the competition rather than annihilating it: enemy captives constituted useful servile labour and captive women were valued for their reproductive capacities.

There is a long-running debate about the nature of domestic slavery in Africa which addresses such questions as: how servile was servile, what was the difference between being a slave and a junior member of a lineage, what relative values were accorded to productive and reproductive labour, and so on.<sup>24</sup> What is clear is that institutions of slavery and of pawnship offered ambitious rulers ways round the rules of kinship

<sup>21</sup> These questions are addressed explicitly by, amongst others, John Lonsdale: John Lonsdale, 'Globalization, Ethnicity and Democracy: A View from "the Hopeless Continent"', in *Globalization in World History*, ed. A. G. Hopkins (2002), 194–220.

<sup>22</sup> The demographic argument is made most explicitly in John Iliffe's work: John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> John Iliffe, *Honour in African History* (Cambridge, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> Claude Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold*, trans. Alide Desnois (Chicago, 1991); *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (Madison, 1977); *Africans in Bondage: Studies in Slavery and the Slave*

and inheritance which otherwise constrained their ability to extend their authority. Ambitious rulers there were, here as elsewhere, and they made efforts to devise new methods of binding others to them unconditionally – sometimes through slavery, sometimes through the exercise of fear and ritual sanction, sometimes through the creation of structures of political authority which cut across lines of inheritance, sometimes (where this was possible) through the distribution of scarce mineral resources and trade goods.

Where conditions were favourable, Africa had its states – as a generation of post-Independence historians were at pains to point out. One of the most impressive was the kingdom of the Asante, in present-day Ghana, the history of which is made accessible to us through the extraordinary work of Ivor Wilks, Tom McCaskie and others.<sup>25</sup> Significant as a political achievement, Asante is also a reminder of the conditions which made political centralisation possible – in this case the conjuncture of rich agricultural resources, and the occurrence of a valuable mineral, gold. Asante's rulers were far-sighted. Amongst other administrative innovations, they devised a system of death duties which enabled them to keep control of the gold. They also created a system of political institutions which integrated kings and chiefs, rather than placing them in structured opposition, as happened in many African polities, with predictable destabilising results. Elsewhere Africa's traditional rulers struggled continually with what has been called the politics of the frontier.<sup>26</sup> Poor soils and the distribution of water supplies rendered centralisation of population difficult (risking food security and epidemic disease), and so one's subjects were more often than not at a distance. Extending authority over neighbouring peoples brought its own problems of control where communication remained difficult and populations were mobile. Attempts to centralise military power and to tax subject populations were countered by what Albert Hirschman called the 'exit option', which in this context basically means the option of moving away both physically and socially.<sup>27</sup>

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*Trade*, ed. Paul Lovejoy (Madison, 1986); *Pawnship in Africa: Debt Bondage in Historical Perspective*, ed. Toyin Falola and Paul Lovejoy (Boulder, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Ivor Wilks, *Ashanti in the Nineteenth Century: Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (Cambridge, 1977); Ivor Wilks, *Forests of Gold: Essays on the Akan and the Kingdom of Asante* (Athens, OH, 1996); T. C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante* (Cambridge, 2003); *The History of the Ashanti Kings and the Whole Country Itself and Other Writings*, by Ofumfuu, ed. A. Adu Boahen *et al.*, Nana Agyeman Premphah 1 (Oxford, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Igor Kopytoff, *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies* (Bloomington, 1987).

<sup>27</sup> On the long durée of political systems in Africa see the work of Jan Vansina, *How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa before 1600* (Charlottesville, VA, 2005); *idem*, *Paths in the Rainforest: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, 1990).

Over the long durée we can say then that African political systems were characterised by the ongoing push and pull between centralisation and fission. Does it matter that such a large proportion of Africa's pre-colonial population lived in decentralised polities? There is a strong argument that it did not: given the prevailing conditions, centralisation may have had little to offer (until the arrival of Europeans with other ideas that is).<sup>28</sup> More significant than political decentralisation was the related phenomenon of sparse population and the 'exit option'.

Here I draw especially on the work of both Gareth Austin and Frederick Cooper.<sup>29</sup> African pre-colonial rulers, argues Cooper, were never very good at intensively exploiting their subjects. Africa was a hard place to exploit, 'a discovery made by its own would-be rulers and later by a variety of would-be conquerors' – it was not that oppression and appropriation were unknown to Africa – far from it – but that the exit option was relatively open, not just for geographic reasons but also for social ones. Extensive kinship ties, diverse networks of affiliation, the adaptability of social systems to migration and the reconstitution of politics all made it relatively easy for people to evade would-be exploiters. The consequences of 'this capacity to fend off or escape routinised economic exploitation were not all happy ones' writes Cooper, and we will see why.<sup>30</sup>

Austin provides a judicious assessment of the consequences of all of this for Africa's history of economic and political development. Given the general abundance of land and the relative scarcity of labour, what were the growth strategies available to Africans?<sup>31</sup> Raising labour productivity in agriculture through the application of fixed capital was difficult, partly because soils in Africa are generally thin, making ploughing and intensive permanent agricultural production difficult. The exceptions again confirm the rule, for instance in the case of the application of the plough in parts of Ethiopia. It follows that in most parts of Africa it was difficult if not impossible to raise revenue from land. Though there were significant exceptions (in iron-working and textile industries for example), craft specialisation and petty commodity production were

<sup>28</sup> Lonsdale, 'Globalization'.

<sup>29</sup> Gareth Austin, 'Markets with, without, and in spite of States: West Africa in the Pre-colonial Nineteenth Century', Department of Economic History, London School of Economics, Working Paper No. 03/04, Mar. 2004; Gareth Austin, 'The Labour-Intensive Path to Industrialization: An Africanist Perspective', paper presented at the African Studies Association of the UK biennial meeting, Birmingham, 2002; Gareth Austin, 'Resources and Strategies South of the Sahara: Long-term Dynamics of African Economic Development', paper presented at the African Studies Association, Washington DC, Nov. 2005; Frederick Cooper, 'Africa's Pasts and Africa's Historians', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 34 (2000), 298–336; Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940* (Cambridge, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> Cooper, 'Africa's Pasts', 321.

<sup>31</sup> Austin, 'Labour-Intensive Path'.

limited by the same factors – the sparseness of population, poor transport and communications.

This did not mean that there was no trade. Trading systems there were, including the ancient trans-Saharan trade, and the Indian Ocean trade which extended inland to sources of gold in present-day Zimbabwe. When, in 1352, Ibn Battuta came across cowry shells in Mali, they had already been in use for centuries by traders.<sup>32</sup> Aside from these long-distance systems, dense networks of exchange had also emerged in regions where complementary ecological zones met (the forest and the savannah, for example), along with some specialisation in petty-commodity production, in the textile industry, for example.

It follows from this general theory of labour scarcity in Africa that the major brake on the development of internal markets was the difficulty of securing a supply of labour to meet the demand for goods. Because prospective employers found it difficult to persuade largely self-sufficient peasants to yield their labour, ambitious accumulators usually resorted to coercion.<sup>33</sup> Where labour markets existed, then, they took the form of a trade in rights in people – usually captives from other groups reduced to slaves or pawns. It was a rational response. Rather than struggle to appropriate a surplus from their own peasant subjects (and face all the attendant social hurdles which that involved), Africa's big men externalised the extraction process and captured slaves from other groups. This way they also avoided (up to a point, but only up to a point) the eternal questions of legitimacy which arose from attempting to harness the labour of those who considered themselves 'kin'; this way African societies retained their deeply held valuation of people rather than things, whilst simultaneously transforming other peoples' people *into* things. But it was a precarious balancing act.<sup>34</sup>

It was, of course, the nature of Africa's encounter with the 'modern world' which transformed this internal African dynamic into one with lasting global implications. This encounter came with the slave trade. There was a 'tragic paradox' in the fact that a labour scarce continent became the source of labour for the New World. It might not make sense at the collective level to sell people, but it made perfect sense for individual African rulers. As Frederick Cooper argues, the export slave trade had a very particular appeal to ruthless rulers. It offered them the possibility of

<sup>32</sup> Jan. S. Hogendorn and Marion Johnson, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1986). On currency in Africa see also *Money Matters: Instability, Values and Social Payments in the Modern History of West African Communities*, ed. J. I. Guyer (Portsmouth, NH, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> Austin, 'Labour-Intensive Path', for a summary of this argument.

<sup>34</sup> On 'wealth in people and things' see the collection of essays in the *Journal of African History*, 36 (1995), also Charles Piot, 'Of Slaves and the Gift: Kabre Sale of Kin during the Era of the Slave Trade', *Journal of African History*, 37 (1996), 31–49.

making large profits without the problem of extracting and disciplining labour.

It is not just that millions of Africans were lost to the slave trade, and all the human tragedy involved in that, but, Cooper argues, the external trade in people entrenched a model of accumulation which has persisted. Neither colonial rulers nor their post-colonial successors found it easy to pursue strategies of sustainable exploitation internally to African economies, but easy money was always to be made at the interface with the outside world, as in the period of the slave trade. Independent African rulers, writes Cooper, have presided over 'gatekeeper states' able to control the interface with the outside world better than production and commerce within.<sup>35</sup>

Cooper's argument seems generally convincing to me. It is broad enough to accommodate the view that much of Africa's current poverty is the result of the policy failures of the last twenty years or so, but it places this in a longer-term perspective of the relationship between Africa's ruling elites and the world economy. But of course any rendering of history at such a level of generalisation is bound to leave us with some questions, and this is where some of the most interesting and challenging work in African history and anthropology is taking place. Jane Guyer is at the forefront of this work.<sup>36</sup> She has argued that though the idea of wealth in people is a powerful one, it is largely unspecified. She goes on to demonstrate the multiple dimensions of the value accorded to persons in Africa, which she describes as a regime of quality as well as quantity. These multiple dimensions cannot be understood in materialist or demographic terms alone. Neither, she argues, can we assume that a pattern of accumulation built on capture was completely separate from the apparently more circuitous one originating in trading and production, because they crossed over at various points.<sup>37</sup> Finally, Guyer is not persuaded that we have completely answered the puzzle of why so many people were sold into slavery if it is the case that acquiring people lay at the heart of African political self-realisation.

And though most people sold into slavery in Africa were the captives of other more powerful groups (this is where centralised polities *did* have some advantages), this was not always the case. How, asks Charles Piot, can we explain the fact that some people sold their kin in return for

<sup>35</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940* (Cambridge, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> Jane I. Guyer, 'Wealth in People and Self-Realization in Equatorial Africa', *Man*, 28, 2 (1993), 243-65; Jane I. Guyer and S. M. Eno Belinga, 'Wealth in People as Wealth in Knowledge: Accumulation and Composition in Equatorial Africa', *Journal of African History*, 36 (1995), 91-129; Jane I. Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (Chicago, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> This is part of a larger critique of the notion of 'separate spheres' in Africa's economic history, and is elaborated in Guyer's latest book, *Marginal Gains*.

cowry shells,<sup>38</sup> Samuel Johnson, the nineteenth-century historian of the Yoruba, asked the same question.<sup>39</sup> In the case of the Kabre of Togo studied by Piot, an especially close and affectionate relationship was said to exist between a child and his or her mother's brother. Yet in the era of the slave trade it was your maternal uncle who was more likely than anyone else to sell you into slavery: beware close affective relationships would seem to be the lesson of this story. Piot explains this apparent puzzle in terms of the complex internal logic of the Kabre prestational economy, and the intersection between the local Kabre 'gift' economy and the larger political economy of slavery. As Guyer puts it, 'in lived practice, investment "portfolios" with a wealth-in-people model' were far from static. What emerges from this literature is the complex nature of the engagement of African economic and social systems with the world economy, and the moral dilemmas created by and negotiated through the sale of people.

Africa's more ruthless rulers may have attempted to avoid the moral issues involved in transforming people into things through their sale of captive strangers who were already somehow 'other', but like Guyer I am not persuaded that they avoided the question completely. After all, these were polities which prior to the slave trade had often raided for captives in order to assimilate neighbouring groups, and, in any case, as Piot reminds us, not all of those sold into slavery were strangers, some of them were kin. No wonder that men like Samuel Crowther were so horrified by what they saw in parts of nineteenth-century West Africa. It was not only their Christian sensibilities which were offended, but their traditional African sensibilities too. Meanwhile, unable to imagine the modern monster which was the sugar plantation, African rulers, including those who were themselves heavily involved in the trade, puzzled over the voracious appetite of the Europeans for slaves. In many societies consumption on this scale was a symptom of a cannibalistic kind of witchcraft. Rosalind Shaw argues that the memory of the slave trade is still very evident in Sierra Leone today in the forms taken by witchcraft accusations, and the same could be argued for other parts of Africa heavily affected by the trade.<sup>40</sup> Selling people needed some social justification, so captives were often accused of being witches involved in the invisible consumption of others. By this means the sellers of slaves accused their victims of precisely that in which they were themselves implicated – the

<sup>38</sup> Charles Piot, 'Of Slaves and the Gift'.

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A History of the Yorubas from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate* (London, 1921).

<sup>40</sup> Rosalind Shaw, 'The Production of Witchcraft/Witchcraft as Production: Memory, Modernity and the Slave Trade in Sierra Leone', *American Ethnologist*, 24, 4 (1997), 856–76; Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago, 2002).

illegitimate (in local terms) transformation of persons into things. Shaw puts it like this: 'By authorising one of the principal ways in which persons were transformed into slaves, those who controlled witch-finding divinations accused those convicted as witches of an invisible "eating" of others analogous to that in which they were themselves engaged.' Yet at the same time their own participation in an 'eating' trade was inevitably also the object of social commentary. It is not easy to get away with 'eating' others.

As a whole body of work on the 'modernity of witchcraft' shows, wealth in Africa is often assumed to have been acquired through invisible means. Shaw, amongst others, suggests that such understandings of the workings of the modern world can be traced back to the era of the slave trade.

In a recent piece in the *Guardian* the Nigerian novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (whose novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, was shortlisted for the Orange Prize) complained that virtually no one would read her novel in Nigeria, and more generally that the Nigerian public hardly reads novels at all.<sup>41</sup> She acknowledges the argument that Nigerians are just too poor to read – literature being a pursuit of the middle class 'and our middle class is being economically eroded'. But she goes on to point out that many Nigerians *do* read, but what they read are religious manuals and self-help books assuring their readers that there are answers to the apparent mystery of why some get fat and rich while the majority grow poor. It is a literature that assures Nigerians that wealth is a spiritual virtue or, as Adichie puts it, a 'scarcity-driven brand of religion where pastors in sleek churches assure you that what God wants you to have is that new Mercedes Benz'. Such brands of religion are precisely targeted, one could argue, because, as in the period of the slave trade, so much of contemporary Nigeria's wealth creation is externalised and therefore subject to suspicion.

If the slave trade had lasting effects on how some Africans thought about wealth creation, it was crucially important too for the ways in which it framed the encounter between Europeans and African peoples in the nineteenth century. We know that in earlier centuries such encounters (limited as they were mainly to coastal societies) involved complex interactions of the kind described by Bayly and others in many parts of the non-European world.<sup>42</sup> But slavery, Abolition and the development of racial thinking in the nineteenth century had profound effects on the construction of 'Africa' and on the way in which Africans would be located in the emerging global order. Not all of this was new – it had some deep roots – but if Africans struggled to solve their own moral dilemmas over slavery through their own cultural referents, Europeans (both pro and

<sup>41</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 'Blinded by God's Business', *Guardian*, 19 Feb. 2005, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Thornton, *The Kongolesse Saint Anthony*; Peter Mark, *Portuguese Style and Luso-African Identity* (Bloomington, 2002).

anti-slavery) were faced with similar challenges. Debates over Abolition when combined with new scientific theories had the paradoxical effect of hardening racial attitudes. The forces of liberalism as they spread through the world, as Bayly acknowledges, bred complex reactions and produced unforeseen consequences.

We can see the seeds of this in one example from mid-eighteenth-century France, even before the advent of liberalism and before lines of race had been hardened by scientific racism. Francisque, an Indian-born slave, was taken by his master to France, and promptly evaded his control. His master attempted to claim him back, but Francisque was represented by a legal team which argued that as an Indian, Francisque was not covered by the French laws devised for slaves. These laws, they said, assumed slaves to be blacks, from Africa, and Francisque is not an African. They backed up their argument with an elaborate contrast between the supposed barbarity of the African and the civility of Francisque's Indian natal home, drawing on Buffon's climatological theories which isolated the African as peculiarly suited to slavery. And when push came to shove they resorted to physiological difference directly: here is Francisque, look at him,

it suffices to see him to know that he has never spent a day on the burning sands of Guinea or Senegal. It is true that his nose is a bit large, his lips a little fat. But disregarding his colour, he looks more European than many Europeans who need only black skin to appear African.<sup>43</sup>

The lawyers won their case – Francisque was freed on the basis that though his legal status was that of slave, his Indian cultural origins and lack of African physical features meant that he was not a 'black', and by slaves, we really mean 'blacks'.

In the nineteenth century, then, Europeans approached Africa with a number of preconceptions, some with long genealogies, others the product of recent history. Africa was located at or near the bottom of the civilisational and material heap. While Asia had been the source of manufactured goods which had fuelled cultures of consumption in Europe (and which now, of course, would be subject to the competition attendant on industrialisation), Africa had been the source of nothing much but coerced labour. While for some the slave trade spoke to the greed of Europeans and the dark side of modernity, it was also true that Africans had been selling one another – more evidence, if it were needed, of the depravity of the 'dark continent'. If Africa had anything to offer at all it was likely to be hidden in the landscape, not in the fabric of the society: untapped sources of minerals – gold for example. For while some

<sup>43</sup> Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth Century Mauritius* (Durham, NC, 2005), 157, quoting Sue Peabody, 'There Are No Slaves in France' (New York and Oxford, 1996), 65–6.

went to Africa with Christianity and Commerce in mind, others went with a more smash-and-grab approach to the economics of colonisation, backed up by the doctrine of free trade.

In order to understand the position of Africa in the 'modern world' we need a conception of history, like Bayly's, which crosses spaces, tracks global processes, regards African and European structures as mutually interacting and mutually constitutive and which recognises that globalisation was a multi-centred phenomenon. Beneath and in the interstices of apparent European hegemony, after all, a vibrant Islamic culture continued and continues to make its mark on the history, politics and economics of large swathes of the continent, and the current flow of African missionaries to Britain and other godless places reminds us of just how far the Christian centre of gravity has shifted in the modern world. But as Bayly is at pains to point out, global processes and uniformities had as their corollary the creation of local particularities. Perhaps the main problem with Bayly's thesis when applied to Africa is that it obscures the degree to which Africa was *not* fully integrated into the processes he describes as being global.

This is a hazardous argument for an historian of Africa to make. After all, for decades we have been emphasising that Africa *is* part of the world, that it was and is subject to the same forces as other parts of the world, that Africans are capitalists too, that politics in Africa are like politics elsewhere, that witchcraft is a thoroughly modern business and so on. Replacing a theory of European exceptionalism with one of African peculiarity is certainly not what I am suggesting here, but the seemingly intractable problem of poverty on the continent, to which the Commission on Africa, if nothing else, has drawn the world's attention, must also direct the historian's attention to the longer-term history of Africa's incorporation into the modern world and its global economy.

Let me return to Frederick Cooper's argument. Africa was a hard place to exploit internally due to the 'exit option' and so the history of wealth creation in Africa is one, by and large, of externalisation of the process, most evidently in the period of the slave trade. Africa, through the slave trade, and later as a producer of primary products, was intimately linked to the evolution of capitalism in Europe, but Cooper questions the degree to which institutions of 'entrepreneurship' turned into self-reproducing social structures that assure, or, as Marx saw it, compel workers and capitalists alike to optimise their economic activities and innovate'. Cooper argues that the colonial rulers who came on the scene towards the end of the nineteenth century were no more successful than their predecessors in turning Africa into a 'predictable space for rational economic exploitation'. Colonial states were relatively weak. They might try to control access to land and to socially engineer the supply of labour, but their capacity to do so was

limited. Much colonial development centred on extraction from isolated areas of mineral production. Elsewhere, Cooper argues, colonial rulers had to be satisfied with gaining when they could from largely autonomous African agricultural initiatives. Communication channels were narrow, geared to extraction and running from interior to coast. Independent Africa's rulers then inherited this pattern of looking outwards rather than inwards to make a profit. Africa's rulers, argues Cooper, were able to control the interface with the outside world better than production and commerce from within. Their lasting creation has been the 'gatekeeper state'. Political struggles concentrate on access to and control over the 'gate' to the outside world, since this is where large profits can be made, legally and illegally. Distrustful of competition and of any autonomous initiatives, Africa's ruling elites also became authoritarian in an attempt to control societies which in some ways remained stubbornly mobile, hard to pin down and 'undocile'.

This is not the same as saying that the forces of capitalism left 'traditional' Africa intact – this would be absurd – it is rather to argue that the impact of capitalism has been particularly uneven in Africa, behaving with an unpredictability which reinforces (not unreasonable) beliefs that its workings are closely connected to unseen forces.<sup>44</sup> Neither the market nor the state works in completely known ways, though both violence and neglect have often characterised the operation of the latter. In parts of Africa blessed (or some might say cursed) with oil resources the contrast between the wealth which can be created through the hard labour of the peasantry and that which can be grasped by having some position on the gate between international oil companies and the black stuff itself is *so* great that it is hard for most ordinary people to conceive of these two activities as related at all. In Nigeria in the 1980s, Karin Barber tells us, people well understood that 'Petro nairas' were produced, not through virtuous labour, but through bribery and through nefarious means connected to the occult.<sup>45</sup> The role of international financial institutions continues the theme of externalisation and cannibalistic consumption. Rural as well as urban Africans are well aware that key decisions affecting their livelihoods, their survival even, are made in distant capitals by people whose thinking is not entirely transparent, even if their vocabulary is one in which the word transparency comes up a lot. No wonder that literate Nigerians spend their money on self-help pamphlets purporting to demystify money-making, no wonder that

<sup>44</sup> On the radical unpredictability of African economies and its effects on local initiatives see Sara Berry, *No Condition Is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Madison, 1993); Guyer, *Monetary Gains*.

<sup>45</sup> Karin Barber, 'Popular Reactions to the Petro-Naira', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 20, 3 (1982), 431–50.

stories of bloodsucking and cannibalism have more currency than ever in Africa, no wonder that the International Monetary Fund is accused of sucking blood through a pipeline which extends from villages in Southern Malawi to downtown Washington DC to pay for food aid.<sup>46</sup>

Recent histories of empire have, like Bayly's account of the birth of the modern world, stressed its multi-faceted and locally complex nature. This has been a welcome development and one in which historians of Africa have willingly participated, emphasising African agency, African appropriations of the modern techniques of literacy, the central role of African intermediaries in empire and so on. In *Captives* Linda Colley rightly argued that the experience of empire could not be viewed as co-extensive with that of Atlantic slavery, because generally the impact of empire was more uneven, sometimes shallow and far more slow; because intruders were frequently limited in number and dependent often on a measure of indigenous tolerance.<sup>47</sup> But for Africa, I would argue, it is precisely this combination of patchy violent intervention producing coerced labour (for the slave trade, for Leopold's rubber state, for the mines of Southern Africa) and skeletal administration, shallow hegemony and economic neglect which has produced such a difficult inheritance for contemporary Africans, millions of whom now voluntarily seek a life on other continents.

Africa's problems of poverty are not unique, and some of these problems have been exacerbated in the last twenty years by the interventions of international agencies. But the longer history of Africa's awkward integration into the 'modern world' has also left us with a challenging legacy.

<sup>46</sup> Megan Vaughan, 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, 25, 6 (25 Mar. 2003).

<sup>47</sup> Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600–1850* (London, 2002).