

[Northrup on Gilbert and Reynolds, 'Africa in World History: From Prehistory to the Present'](#)

Review published on Friday, October 1, 2004

Erik Gilbert, Jonathan T. Reynolds. *Africa in World History: From Prehistory to the Present.* Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2004. 416 pp. \$42.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-13-092907-5.

Reviewed by David Northrup (Department of History, Boston College) **Published on** H-World (October, 2004)

This is a very good survey of the entire sweep of African history. Intended for college students but probably accessible at a lower level, it is clearly written and concise enough to be used in a one-semester course. The two authors, who completed doctorates in African history at Boston University in the mid-1990s, have also made a remarkable effort to bring the latest scholarship and insights into their narrative. For all these reasons, world history teachers whose formal education did not include a course on Africa will find this a useful overview, although they should be aware of its flaws.

The book is fairly conventional in many respects, but quite innovative in others. The authors divide the book into two uneven parts at 1500 C.E.: seven chapters (116 pages) for antiquity and medieval developments; eleven chapters (252 pages) for the modern period. Their efforts to place Africa's history in a global context is more novel since it goes against the trend of the last several decades to understand Africa's history through African eyes and to avoid the earlier tendency to attribute changes in Africa to external causes. By moving the pendulum back to the middle, the authors seek to balance external and internal factors.

The effort to site Africa in a global historical context is not entirely new. J. D. Fage's well-established *History of Africa* (4th ed., 2001) has been emphasizing the ancient Mediterranean, Islamic, and Indian Ocean contexts of Africa's early history, as well as the period of increasing European influences since 1500--much in the same way as does the volume under review. However, Gilbert and Reynolds have a larger agenda. Besides exploring Africa's connections with its immediate neighbors, they seek to place the continent's history in a broad global context. Thus, they are not content just to launch the Atlantic slave trade from Africa but devote much of a long chapter to tracing the history of the African diaspora in the Americas. Similarly, they do not just trace the course of European imperialism in Africa but also show how the African experience was part of a global phenomenon.

To sustain this global approach each chapter ends with a section placing African realities in a global context. On the whole this is a very useful effort and some of these little essays are exceptionally well done. Less successful is the pattern of beginning chapters at a global level, especially when the introductions feature non-African events. Will the comprehension of the students, for whom this volume is intended, really be helped, for example, by beginning a section on internal African population movements with brief references to Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan migrations and the linguistic complexity of highland New Guinea? Likewise, beginning the chapter on new imperialism with an account of earlier gunboat diplomacy in East Asia raises interesting parallels, but at the risk of explaining the unfamiliar in terms of the equally unfamiliar.

Citation: H-Net Reviews. Northrup on Gilbert and Reynolds, 'Africa in World History: From Prehistory to the Present'. H-World. 04-07-2014.

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/20292/reviews/21075/northrup-gilbert-and-reynolds-africa-world-history-prehistory-present>
Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

Presenting African history in a global framework is admirable and an imaginative goal, but readers will probably differ in their assessment of its success and utility. This reviewer found the results uneven. The first part of the book is uniformly well done and successful in showing Africa's global connections to the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and the Islamic world. However, after 1500 the global approach to Africa's past tends to exaggerate the importance of external European forces at the expense of forces operating from within Africa. The tendency is particularly disturbing in the five middle chapters in the book (a third of its length) that cover the period between 1500 and the late-nineteenth century. Despite the authors' explicit recognition when considering the new imperialism of the late-nineteenth century and resulting colonial rule that it "would be wrong ... to assume that Europe has dominated Africa for a long time" (p. 245), readers may easily get the opposite impression from reading the chapters dealing with Africa between 1500 and 1850. Not only does their treatment of this era begin with a huge chapter on the Atlantic slave trade and its consequences, but European influences are also heavily emphasized in the other chapters dealing with this era.

The issue is one of balance. Chapter 9, for example, is admirable in its effort to present the early Atlantic encounters through both African and European eyes, but by making the encounters its central focus it is led to ignore other themes of importance in African history. Chapters 10 and 11, dealing respectively with North and East Africa, provide interesting accounts of the three-way struggles among African, European, and outside Muslim forces. The East African chapter is particularly prone to sacrifice African perspectives and, instead, concentrate its attention on the Swahili Coast, which was a locus of contention between European and Omani interests. As a consequence the most densely populated parts of East Africa along the Great Lakes, whose history was not yet linked to the outside, receive no attention at all. In dealing with regions where European influences were quite limited before the mid-nineteenth century, the authors are inclined to extend the chronological limits of these chapters to include European actions that foreshadow the colonial conquest.

The cumulative effect of these arrangements is to give the impression that the new imperialism was a direct extension of four centuries of imperialist actions rather than the more common view that it was a sharp break with four centuries of more equal relations between Africans and Europeans. This arguably exaggerated emphasis on European power and influence, in these middle chapters, is usually given a strongly negative slant. Thus in chapter 11 on East Africa, 1500-1850, Portuguese and British activities are mostly cast in a negative light, while Omani Arab imperialism receives a largely positive gloss. Britain's lengthy efforts to suppress the slave trade from Omani territories along the East African coast are termed "usurpation" of Omani imperial power (p. 217).

Readers may differ in how acceptable they find this anti-imperialist emphasis, and it must be said that in some places it is more nuanced than in others. However, those not already familiar with Africa may miss how often African perspectives are omitted. Chapter 12, treating southern Africa in the same period, for example, gives a great deal of attention to the role of Europeans in imposing new identities on Africans, but, despite the wealth of scholarly attention it has received, the chapter says almost nothing of the roles freely played by Africans in the complex process of ethnogenesis underway at the time.

Fortunately the coverage of European and African actions in shaping the course of the colonial decades is much more balanced. It is welcome to see culture, including popular culture, receiving far

more attention than one generally encounters in surveys. Colonial policies and Christian missionaries are given a fair and even-handed coverage, and the spread of Christianity is nicely balanced by coverage of the rapid spread of Islam under colonial rule. However, a rather perverse view is presented of anthropologists, who are said to have "reflected the prejudices of their times" and "represented Africans as primitive, exotic, and alien" (p. 308). On the whole, it would be easier to make the opposite case, as Jack Goody has effectively argued in *The Expansive Moment: Anthropology in Britain and Africa, 1918-1970* (1995).

The authors are to be commended for giving a great deal of attention to issues of pedagogy. Each chapter has a short list of recommended readings--although too few in several cases to suggest the scope of reading behind the chapters--and there is a fuller bibliography at the end. There is also a glossary of key terms used in the text, fourteen maps, and many illustrations. The authors also alternate two useful boxed features: primary source selections called "Voices from African History" and historiographical debates among historians called "Controversies." In the chapter on the Atlantic slave trade, the older neo-Marxist interpretations of Eric Williams and Walter Rodney are presented as worthy of equal consideration with more recent scholarship. There is some discussion of facts and issues, but in the end readers are encouraged to draw their own conclusions. Without more guidance from the authors on the role of ideology in generating controversies and the role of scholarship in resolving them, one may wonder about how successful the results may be.

Inevitably, in the haste to get a new work into print, errors and omissions occur that will need to be corrected in later editions. The two boxed features mysteriously disappear after chapter 10. The region south of the Sahara is spelled "Soudan" (in the French manner), which helps to distinguish it from the former Anglo-Egyptian Sudan but corresponds to no English language usage I have even encountered. Equiano's familiar description of the Middle Passage is featured in a box, even though recent research has questioned whether he ever made such a journey. It seems inconsistent in the glossary that the most famous early-nineteenth-century leaders in southeastern Africa, Shaka and Moshoeshoe, have no entries while Dingane and Nongqawuse do. David Livingstone's name appears under three different spellings in the text (two of which are carefully noted in the index) including his repeated misidentification as Daniel in one section.

Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=9884>

Citation: David Northrup. Review of Gilbert, Erik; Reynolds, Jonathan T., *Africa in World History: From Prehistory to the Present*. H-World, H-Net Reviews. October, 2004. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9884>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.