Africa, in its fullness

The West focuses only on slavery, but the history of Africa is so much more than a footnote to European imperialism

by Toby Green

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To understand the complexity and significance of West African history, there is no better thing to do than to go to Freetown. Sierra Leone's capital is sited in the lee of the 'lion-shaped' mountain that gives the country its modern name. Portuguese sailors began to visit this part of West Africa in the second half of the 15th century; after weeks of sailing down the flat mangrove-strewn swamps south from the Senegal river, they knew they were entering a different region when they saw this mountain, and named the whole part of the coast 'Sierra Leone'. Today, the mountain shelters the upmarket beach resorts that stretch south of Freetown; and in the distance you can spy the large hump of Banana Island, where the slave trader John Newton (author of the hymn 'Amazing Grace') was imprisoned by a Temne trader in 1747.

Other aspects of this early history of trade and African-European encounters also remain. By the harbour downtown, by a clutch of corrugated-iron-covered stalls where fish is dried and prepared for sale, is the 'De Ruyter stone'. This stone is named after a Dutch admiral who visited in the early 17th century, during

European wars to control the slave trade, and is believed to have carved his name into one of the rocks that still stands on the beach.

For a long time, historians in the West have seen the Atlantic slave trade as shaping the beginnings of West Africa's engagement with Europe. There is no question that the slave trade exerted a profound influence in many parts of Africa. However, to look at African history as the history of slavery and the slave trade is no more accurate than to study the history of the Nazis as the sum of the German past. Even at the height of the Atlantic trade, there is much more to say about West African history than can possibly be glimpsed by focusing only on the slave trade. Digging a little deeper into Freetown, some of this begins to emerge; and what follows is a brief tour of the city and its historical sites to show how this works in practice.

Freetown was founded in 1792, and soon became a key site in the antislavery movement. After the Act abolishing the slave trade was passed by the UK parliament in 1807, the Royal Naval West Africa Squadron was based in Freetown. Navy ships patrolled the West African coast on the lookout for vessels that Britain deemed to be slaving illegally; if they were captured, the Navy brought them to Freetown, and liberated their captives. In this manner, Freetown came to be home to people from all over West Africa, from as far south as the kingdom of Kongo, from what is now southern Nigeria, and from Dahomey.

Just a few hundred yards above the De Ruyter stone is the Asylum. Founded in 1817, this was where Africans liberated from the festering holds of their ships were first brought. The gates to the Asylum are locked, but multicoloured name tags have been tied around them, embossed with the names of some of the captives who passed through and whom historians have identified. The sign above the Asylum declares it the 'Royal Hospital and Asylum for Africans Rescued from Slavery by British Valour and Philanthropy', passing over in silence the histories of the 17th and 18th centuries when British slave traders (such as John Newton) frequented Sierra Leone; as if to remind visitors how much of African history is still characterised by silence.

The sign above the Asylum, Kings Gate, Freetown, Sierra Leone. Courtesy Sierra Leone Heritage

Just a few blocks up the hill from the Asylum, away from the harbour, is the St John's Maroon Church, founded in 1808 by members of the Maroon community from Jamaica. The Maroons were escaped slaves who had formed their own communities in the Jamaican highlands (just as they did in parts of Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Panama and beyond). Some of them fought in the revolutionary wars in the US in the late-18th century, and then found their way to Freetown in the early 19th century, part of the waves of migration and resettlement during the Age of Revolution. Their church, recently restored, stands as a testament to the ways in which African peoples challenged, fought and resisted colonial power throughout the era of the slave trade.

In Freetown, the Maroons were unpopular with colonial officials. They paraded up and down with their *gumbay* drums, the same drums they had used in Jamaica to communicate plans of uprisings. British officials disapproved, and tried to clamp down on 'the racket'. But *gumbay* had a habit of spreading. It became the popular music as far north as Guinea-Bissau, where it remains the music of choice (as it does in Freetown). Some say *gumbay* was vital in defeating Portuguese colonisers during the independence wars of Guinea-Bissau (1963-74), for *gumbay* was performed in a language outside colonial control, or comprehension, and could help unseat it.

The Maroon church is full of reminders of this history. The rafters have recently

been repainted – bright red. A maroon-coloured flag (the symbol of the Maroons) stands to attention outside the church, and a set of new *gumbay* drums accompanies the choirs at services. During a recent visit, the man who had shown me around was wearing a red cap – the symbol of royalty in this part of West Africa.

From St John's church, you can go through the centre of Freetown until at the northern end you come to the Kongo Cross neighbourhood. Kongo Cross is where liberated Africans settled after they had been released from the slave ships by the Royal Naval Squadron. The city is a crossroads of peoples and places and cultures: the Cross was a powerful religious symbol in Kongo religious cosmology, one that signified the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead. Its name illustrates not just a literal crossroads, but also how ideas and beliefs came with Africans as they travelled in freedom and captivity throughout the era of the slave trade; in this case, religious ideas that were at the heart of how these migrants perceived themselves in relation to the world, as they arrived in the early 19th century.

A visit to Freetown opens windows onto many aspects of Africa's past: the place of music and culture in challenging colonial power, the movement of free as well as captive Africans across oceans, the unique role of religious ideas in connecting communities across the world, and – of course – the importance of slavery in African history. Yet very little of all this comes across in how the African past is perceived, even in Africa – let alone in other parts of the world such as Britain.

I had come to Sierra Leone to participate in an academic writing workshop for young African scholars funded by the British Academy. So I spent most of my time on the campus of the University of Sierra Leone, Fourah Bay College. It usually took around 40 minutes just to send an email (this was in mid-2017). It does not require a novelist to imagine the practical problems involved in studying anything. Meanwhile, the impact of structural adjustment policies on African universities, and of the Sierra Leonean civil war (1991-2002), meant that the institution had been starved of funds for decades. One day, friends and I visited

the main library; we went down to the basement, where we had to use a mobile phone's torch to see anything at all. It was 8:30 in the morning. One glance made clear that no books had been bought for a very long time because there were no funds for it.

Fourah Bay College is one of the oldest universities in West Africa, and its campus sits high above the old town on one of the hills that rings Freetown. There were universities in Africa in medieval times, but this is the oldest university in West Africa. It was founded in 1827 as a theological college for young African priests, usually freshly liberated from the slave ships. The first bishop of Nigeria, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, was educated at Fourah Bay College. In the early 20th century, 'FBC' became the launch pad for ambitious young administrators in British colonial West Africa. During the civil war, the FBC campus saw battles between the government and the rebels. Students look down over the city and the Atlantic Ocean below, but the university remains scarred by these battles.

Many of the challenges that Freetowners face are shared elsewhere in West Africa. After that visit to Freetown, I flew to the city of Bissau, where I spent a few days at the National Research Institute (INEP). This was a regional leader in research during the 1980s and '90s. However, the Guinea-Bissau civil war (1998-99) saw the building taken over as a headquarters by the faction supporting the incumbent president, João Bernardo 'Nino' Vieira. Many documents – some dating back to the 18th century – were destroyed. As with the once-estimable Fourah Bay College, one glance around INEP's library shows that the combination of a civil war and a collapse in funds following structural adjustment has put to rest any institutional book-buying.

It's not that there's any lack of demand for books in Bissau, in fact quite the reverse. There is a small bookshop at INEP and, after one book launch that I attended, all the books on the tables outside the auditorium sold in a matter of minutes. Well-connected colleagues try to step in where the state has disappeared, buying their own stocks of books on trips abroad. This is obviously not a solution.

As a historian of West Africa, when I spend time in West African universities, I understand in a visceral and immediate way how power shapes what research is possible, and how the African past can be taught. While publishing accelerates month by month and year by year in the global North, historians in Bissau and Freetown (and in so many other places) often cannot access basic research resources. The internet is not yet a solution because of the slow connection speeds and unreliable electricity supplies that can take hold. Young people who are making decisions about their futures, and trying to find some way of earning a living, conclude that studying history is not going to put bread on the table or help them to start a family.

In these circumstances, West African governments have put most of their scanty resources into STEM subjects. However, the truth is that many aspects of the African past are vital to illuminating the current reality, and to understanding the challenges that both the continent and the world face as we move into the third decade of the century.

Stereotypically, Westerners have seen Africa as 'the continent without history'. The misrepresentation follows G W F Hegel's 1830s dictum that Africa 'is no historical part of the world'. The misconception continues to condition the way that international agencies approach their work in Africa. Africa's problems are pressing and can have immediate, proximate solutions (developed by external agencies, with international funding). But, of course, this approach merely replicates the idea of Africa as without history, of a continent that requires saving from the outside: by well-meaning abolitionists and missionaries in the 19th century, and by internationalists in the 21st century. History compels us to look at the causes of things, including current problems; and many powerful internal and external actors involved in African society today would apparently prefer to avoid that consideration.

In order to understand many of the challenges of contemporary Africa, a historical framework is vital. The essentialness of history is evident in three key areas. Much of the contemporary political news about Africa discusses, first, the

rise of *jihād* movements in Mali and northern Nigeria; second, the lack of a strong financial base for many of the things that are associated with modern states; and third, the problem of 'failed states' (the Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau, Somalia). These topics are at the basis of many policy papers and research agendas related to Africa, most of which are developed without any deeper sense of the African past. A historical perspective changes the way these questions seem, and also what answers might be effective.

In the case of *jihād* in West Africa, it can be understood only as part of Islam's history as a path of resistance to slavery and social inequalities in West Africa. Outside the continent, Boko Haram is the most well-known of these *jihād* movements. Its leaders are well aware of their historicity, and have often referred to the Sokoto Caliphate as their inspiration. One of the largest states in 19th-century Africa, this caliphate was established in what is now northern Nigeria following a *jihād* movement led in 1804 by a sheikh called Uthmān dān Fodio.

Sokoto rose in the Hausa states around the northern centres of Kano and Borno (now the heartland of Boko Haram). Its influence quickly spread through what is now Nigeria. The major empire of Oyò in the south fell in 1835, following an uprising led by slaves of nobles who had converted to Islam after a *jihād* led in northern Nigeria. With the collapse of Oyò, Lagos was poised to become one of Africa's supercities. Meanwhile, many of the dispossessed were finding in Islam a religion to help resist inequality and the rising power of capitalism. As inequalities had grown, so had more and more people converted, drawing on the power of Islam to fight back against austerity. It drove the uprisings in both northern and southern Nigeria, and quickly spread as far afield as what is now Mali and The Gambia. The dynamic relationship between inequality and the role of *jihād* to oppose it continues, as Boko Haram attests. The facts suggest that, as both grow in the 21st century, diminishing the appeal of *jihād* requires addressing the prevalence of inequalities, probably on a global level.

Meanwhile, in the second case, of the financial base of African politics, it is striking that the states that resisted these transformations connecting *jihād* to the

19th-century struggle against inequality in West Africa were those that had had the strongest capital base. Asante (in what is now Ghana) and Dahomey (in Benin) shifted from retaining gold to exporting it, and from exporting slaves to using slave labour to develop plantation economies. Asante and Dahomey were able to resist the revolutionary waves because of their tax and fiscal base. Tax collection for the development of the army and the state helped them prevent the rise of local militias. A strong state funded by tax was the best way of preventing disorder and revolution. Stable states with effective tax powers enjoy a long history in Africa. Those histories stand ready to help in creating stable, well-fiscalised states in the postcolonial era.

At the same time, although precolonial African history shows that models for effective states and for political stability exist, the precolonial state was often one that developed on a predatory model. Enormous divisions grew between rulers and subjects in the era of the slave trade, a model that was further entrenched in the colonial era. In brief, what political scientists today often analyse as 'problems of the state' – 'state failure', 'narco-states', 'safe havens for terrorists' – have deep historical roots. African peoples learnt to have a deep distrust for the state owing to its historical role in creating predatory economic and political patterns related to the slave trade. They did not want to hand over to the state the monopoly of violence, which is a prerequisite for state success, when that violence had often been used against them.

Overcoming the pattern of exploitation and distrust requires deeper thought and activity than a merely immediate analysis of 'proximate' causes, effects and 'solutions'. It requires historicising African peoples and societies beyond the present, and listening to Africa's voice in this process; in the words of Abiodun Alao's inaugural lecture as professor of African studies at King's College London in 2016, it requires the realisation that 'Africa is a voice to be heard, not a problem to be solved.'

If internet speeds and access to published resources are some of the problems facing the research and teaching of history in many parts of Africa, in other parts

of the world the issues are altogether different. Generally, they come down to prejudicial misconceptions that confirm a narrative of oppression, rather than strength and opportunity – a narrative that is increasingly at odds with the inclinations and needs of the diverse societies of the 21st century.

In Britain, for instance, the fundamental issue is that for 200 years African history has been associated in the Western mind with slavery. Slavery is of course a key aspect of the African past, but there are many other elements that need to be recognised to give a richer and more realistic understanding. The focus on slavery to the exclusion of the artistic, musical, scientific and ecological insights of African societies leads to historical narratives that can alienate many Africans and people of African descent.

Ecology and its intersection with religious history in Africa provides a good example. For centuries, Western travellers belittled the supposed 'primitivism' of African religious beliefs in spirits and shrines (rather ironically, given that these same travellers came from societies where witch burnings were commonplace). Yet religious beliefs were fundamental to the development of ecological practices that are seen these days as innovative and forward-thinking: as the Gambian historian Assan Sarr has shown in his book *Islam, Power, and Dependency in the Gambia River Basin* (2016), because areas of land in Senegambia were seen as occupied by bad spirits, they were unoccupied and left to grow wild, creating natural areas of conservation which 20th-century Western practices have sought – and often failed – to replicate.

The failure to promote a balanced, more historical understanding of Africa does a great disservice to both Africans and to History as a subject. Historians of precolonial Africa use a much richer range of sources than most historians of Europe or North America, and almost all modern historians. Instead of being limited to written sources (documents, books, speeches), or film footage for the 20th century, they draw on anthropology, art, linguistics, music and religious practice to understand the past. The breadth and diversity of sources and disciplines that scholars use form a great way to introduce students, even very

young ones, to the craft and wonder of history.

How then can the deficit in History of Africa be righted, in Africa and beyond? There are some positive moves afoot. In Britain, a new A-level (the main school-leaving qualification) option in precolonial African history is now available, run by the OCR assessment board, since 2015. It was developed according to the ideas of the first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, who said: 'We should write our history as the history of our society in all its fullness. Its history should be a reflection of its self, and contact with Europeans should only figure in it from the viewpoint of the African experience.' Thus, the focus on the slave trade is here in a minor key to the history, political structures and religious and aesthetic frameworks of the kingdoms studied. In this way, African history is taught so as to stress its achievements, while also giving slavery proper attention; and there are now real efforts to bring these insights into the teaching of African history in Key Stage 3 (ages 12-14).

Meanwhile, in West Africa, a team of historians has recently produced a free, online textbook for the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) history test (taken in Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and The Gambia). The exam was written mainly by historians based in West Africa, according to the local syllabus, with suggestions for new topics on gender and environmental history. The free resource is accessible online but slow to download, so 5,500 flashdrives with it will be distributed to teachers across the region over the next months.

These are small steps. Some might see it as a waste of money and resources to dwell on the African past when the problems of the present are so pressing; but without a strong sense of the manifold values of culture and history, the belief that Europe and the US offer something better will continue, as will the waves of West African migrants willing to risk everything to get there.

At the end of my recent visit, some friends and I took a road trip of eight hours

from INEP in Bissau to a conference in The Gambia. We went to discuss oral histories kept in The Gambia and their capacity to foster awareness as to the importance of history in providing a sense of value and a strong identity in contemporary Africa. One of the conclusions was that many in Africa are aware of the depth of the histories that surround them, and yet lack the institutional support to embed the potential of this in society.

After the conference, a friend took me on a trip to one of the old trading posts that dotted the Gambia river and its tributaries from the 16th century onwards. Bintang was on a wide tributary, a couple of hours from Banjul; it had been settled by a few Portuguese men who had intermarried with African women and established trading links. We arrived in the early afternoon, and drove down to the fishing port where canoes were piled up at the jetty. My friend asked where the ruins of the old settlement were, and someone gestured beyond the jetty. We walked past a large midden of shells betokening ancient settlement, and soon saw the clear signs of the fortifications that had been built here more than 400 years before.

Back in the town, I began chatting to some of the fishermen. Yes, they knew all about the settlement here. The ruins were all over the place, and some of the houses were built with the old stones that had been brought from Lisbon. The history was there, known about, but not taught or discussed in schools, in universities, or in shaping a sense of the complexity of the African past. In fact, in most cases, history was taught with a syllabus that was 50 years old.

This picture is mirrored across the continent. One time, many years ago, I was discussing the past with a Senegalese friend, who said that it was better to forget it: I was not a slaver, and he was not enslaved, so what use was there in discussing it? I rehearsed the historian's comfortable canard, that if we forgot the past we would be condemned to repeat it. But if I remember, he said, I'm going to get angry.

And yet there is so much more to African history than stale narratives of slavery and colonialism. One of the most insidious consequences of European colonialism was the devaluing of precolonial history and cultures. As the revolutionary Amílcar Cabral from Guinea-Bissau wrote in a key essay in 1966, colonial force required not only military control but also an ideological conquest, and this necessitated the undermining of older histories and cultures on the continent. The legacy of this lurks in the continuing devaluation of African history and the need to update the way it is taught and studied, both inside and outside the continent. Long into the postcolonial era, the effects of this colonial effort live on in the migration crisis, and the loss of former ways of knowledge that – like those related to ecology, and many other things – have much to offer the world in the 21st century.