

January 2014

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Recommended Citation

Schnose, Moriah (2014) "African History, Western Perceptions, Development, and Travel in Kenya," *History in the Making*: Vol. 7 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol7/iss1/12>

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Travels Through History

African History, Western Perceptions, Development, and Travel in Kenya

By Moriah Schnose

In the summer of 2012, I traveled to Kenya, where I spent time in the capital city Nairobi, the village of Kakuyuni, and a few days on a safari in the Masai region. During my visit, I observed the work of the organization, *Heavenly Treasures*, and witnessed the impact of the myths associated with the West's relationship with Africa. As far back as the 17th century, the Western world has referred to Africa as the "Dark Continent." For centuries, this term evoked a sense of mystery about Africa and its peoples. Currently, the West continues to perceive and perpetuate a false image of Africa. Contrary to popular belief, countries which comprise the continent of Africa are some of the most culturally, economically, politically and historically diverse in the world. Unfortunately, the West continues to portray Africa as both a single country with a primitive, unstructured, and uniform culture.

Before visiting Kenya, I wondered why Africa seemed so vulnerable to war, corruption, poverty, and disease. My own worldview was greatly shaped by the media coverage surrounding Africa, which tends to be very unbalanced. Typically, it covers only the extreme and tragic cases, and fails to represent positive events in Africa. In turn, this view has been used to justify oppressive foreign policy. Moreover, I have come to the conclusion that the majority of the tragedies in Africa are a direct result of foreign influence, particularly by the United States and Europe. How the West views Africa has been socially constructed over centuries of controversial history. Perceptions of Africa from European and American governments have been used to justify exploitive political and economic agendas. Throughout Africa's existence, the West has ignored Africa's political, technological, and economic advances in order to perpetuate the image of Africa being inferior to the West. Understanding Africa's complex history is therefore essential in order to avoid further misunderstanding.

Depictions of East African History

For thousands of years, societies in Africa possessed highly structured political systems, advanced commerce, and integral social systems. Before Europeans ever rounded the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, contact had long been established between Africans living along the Swahili coast (and as far inland as what is now Uganda) and people living along the perimeter of the Indian Ocean (but particularly those in India). What started as merely an economic relationship based on mutual interest in trade, evolved into an intricate cultural exchange. Traders would move with the seasons, spending part of the year in their homelands and part of the year living near the Horn of Africa, including what is now Kenya and Tanzania. They would marry and start families along coasts throughout the Indian Ocean, trading not only monetary products, but also ideas, and religions, among others.¹

The earliest interactions between Europeans and the Swahili Coast were drastically different from the way in which the West has framed Africa over the past few hundred years. The constructs of race upheld today did not exist when the Portuguese first arrived on the shores of what is now Kenya in the mid-seventeenth century. The Portuguese had a very inaccurate understanding about the size of the African continent, and because the people of the Swahili coast had complex trading systems with coastal people throughout the Indian Ocean that date back to around the year 1,000 C.E., the Portuguese did not view them as African. Instead, the Portuguese thought of the African populace as Arabs. The Portuguese relied heavily on Africans along the Swahili coast as translators with Indians, and they highly respected the ability to speak multiple languages. Thus, they did not approach relations with the people of the Swahili coast with a mindset of superiority. Instead, they saw great potential in maintaining strong economic ties with them.² This history is often overlooked.

Western radicalized discourse on Africa as we know it today, emerged during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Ideologies that have deemed black skin as inferior have helped justify chattel slavery in the Americas, can also be found in Jewish, Christian and Islamic texts.³ The

¹ Jeremy Prestholdt, "Portuguese Conceptual Categories and the 'Other' Encounter on the Swahili Coast," *Journal of Asian & African Studies (Brill)* 36, no. 4 (2001): 383-406.

² Ibid.

³ David Goldberg, "The Curse of Ham," *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, 1 (2003): 168-177. Monotheistic religions have justified slavery by arguing that blackness and slavery are both curses from God. Ham was the son of the Biblical figure Noah who found Noah

negative views of Africa were solidified during the period of colonization during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As chattel slavery was abolished towards the end of the eighteenth century, Westernized countries (particularly Protestant Christians influenced by the Great Awakening), began to advocate for the exploration of Africa's interior. Unfortunately, due to misunderstandings of African culture, along with European's own superiority complexes, led to the partitioning of Africa.⁴

Western scientists, explorers, and missionaries were among the earliest Westerners to explore Africa's interior. The expansion within the field of biology during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries further promoted the ideology of African being inferior to European. Westerners justified their invasion with claims that Africans were biologically "uncivilized" and "primitive." Motivated by the view that Africans were inferior to them, Western scientists speculated that Africans were the "missing link." Historians John and Jean Comaroff pointed out that "the vocabulary of natural science was to strengthen and legitimize the association of the Dark Continent with black bodies and dim minds. Comparative anatomical schemes typically presented Africans as the most extreme contrast with Europeans...the 'link' between man and beast."⁵

The work of explorers in Africa was largely funded by Western governments.⁶ Despite the fact that empires were seen as outdated and

intoxicated and informed his brothers. Noah viewed this as a mockery and cursed Ham, along with his decedents, to servitude.

⁴ Anthony Dachs, "Missionary Imperialism-The Case of Bechuanaland," *Journal of African History*, 4 (1973): 647-658.

⁵ John and Jean Comaroff, "Africa Observed: Discourses of the Imperial Imagination," *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, 1 (1991): 86-125. Although their goal was to convert Africans to Christianity, missionaries often maintained close ties to colonial forces. Missionaries portrayed themselves as heroes from the "evil witch-doctor." Due to missionaries demanding that Africans convert to Christianity and denounce all tradition which were deemed unholy by their standards, Christian missionaries in Africa have been accused of cultural genocide. As missionaries moved further into the interior of Africa, they set up missionary posts and would receive military protection from their homelands. This helped justify early Western military involvement in Africa.

⁶ Jan Pieterse, "In the Dark Continent," *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (1992): 64-75. We can particularly see this in the case of Henry Morton Stanley. Stanley was born in Wales to a young, unwed mother. At age eighteen, he moved to the United States and served on both sides of the American Civil War. Commissioned by James Gordon Bennett Jr., son of founder of the New York Herald, Stanley set out to find Dr. David Livingstone. Livingstone, who was a famous missionary in Africa during the 1800's, traveled into the interior of Africa and re-named major geographical

costly to maintain, Europeans sat down specifically to lay claim to land in Africa at the Berlin Conference, in 1884. Otto Von Bismarck, first Chancellor of unified Germany, and host of the Berlin Conference, invited representatives from fourteen European nations including the United States, as in the words of King Leopold, to: “carve up ... that magnificent African cake.” Not a single African was invited, and yet these European powers drew new borders for African countries. They are recorded to have literally taken a ruler to a map of Africa and penciled in many of the countries we know today. In some cases, they attempted to follow geographical borders such as rivers and yet not a single cultural border was taken into consideration.⁷ By 1900, the only non-colonized countries in Africa were Ethiopia and Liberia, with Liberia remaining under control of the United States.

In the Scramble for Africa, Kenya was claimed by the British Empire. Great Britain governed Kenya, like most English colonies, with indirect rule. Kenyans were allowed to maintain much of their own systems but were responsible for reporting back to the British. Kenya has been politically independent from Great Britain since 1963.⁸ Following decolonization, several African countries, including Kenya, turned to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization to help rebuild their nations. In order for African nations to borrow money from these groups, they often had to agree to Structural Adjustment Programs. These programs made it nearly impossible for African countries to pay back the money they borrowed, and insisted that borrowers cut social spending, cut income taxes, expand privatization, liberalize trade, and restrict subsidization. Several organizations have responded to this by promoting debt relief. This form of aid has been proven to help temporarily, but does nothing to prevent the borrowing governments from having to borrow again.

locations in the name of Great Britain. When Livingstone and Stanley met, Africans became the backdrop in their own land. This story has been propagated for centuries. In 1876, Stanley was commissioned by King Leopold of Belgium to establish an undercover organization that laid claim to the Congo, titled the *International African Association*. It was disguised as a scientific organization with the intent to “civilize” and “Christianize” Africans. Instead, Leopold turned the Congo into a work camp, which led to the estimated death of ten million Africans.

⁷ Norman Etherington, "A False Emptiness: How Historians May Have Been Misled by Early Nineteenth Century Maps of South-eastern Africa," *Imago Mundi*, 1 (2004): 67-87.

⁸ It is too simple to say European nations “pulled out” of Africa. Some did, but in many cases black Africans fought long and hard to gain political and economic control. The greatest example of this is the Apartheid system in South Africa, a system that was not overthrown until 1995. Kenya has been politically independent of Great Britain since 1963.

Throughout Europe and North America, there is widespread perception that Africa needs to be saved or rescued, and that salvation cannot come from within Africa. The image of Africans on their knees begging for freedom and support is one that first appeared during the rise of missionaries in Africa. This image still remains prevalent today and has huge implications on how Africa is viewed.⁹ “Kony 2012,” the U2 Live Aid Concerts, “Save Darfur,” and numerous other campaigns that appear to promote the betterment of Africa constantly bombard the Western media. Although some of these organization and individuals do genuinely make a positive difference in Africa, most only perpetuate the stereotype that the continent of Africa is helpless, pitiful, and hopeless without outside aid. Indeed, in Western media, it is difficult to escape the latest updates of famous celebrities holding concerts, adopting children, and developing entire clothing lines aimed at “saving” Africa to the point where “helping” Africa has become trendy. Infomercials interrupt air-time to tell the tragic story of orphan children dying of disease and malnourishment. The problem with these campaigns, organizations, and movements, is that they do little to empower Africans to change what they want within their communities, much less to create a positive and lasting impact. Instead, they often do more damage than good, and create a paternalistic relationship between the West and Africa.

Assessing a Modern Development Project

In recent years, a new participatory approach for development has emerged: micro-enterprise, also known as micro-credit or micro-finance. Micro-enterprise consists of giving a micro-loan or micro-credit to a business of typically no more than ten people. As the business earns their money back, it is agreed upon that they also pay back their debtors. This is meant to help grow self-sufficient business. These “debtors” then are meant to go on to grow more micro-finance businesses. While in Kenya, I got to partner with and observe the work of a micro-enterprise organization based out of Glendora, California called *Heavenly Treasure*, founded in 1998. They are connected to thirteen countries worldwide, and three countries in Africa including; Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya. Currently, *Heavenly Treasure* is working with thirteen different micro-credit companies within Kenya.

Unlike traditional forms of Western aid in Africa that veer on the side of paternalism, the goal of the micro-finance is to provide “access to flexible, convenient, and affordable financial

⁹ This view of Africa directly correlates with the ethnocentric and racial ideology of Protestant missionaries over a century ago. Europeans knew so little about Africa, and yet they saw themselves fit to train them how to live.

services. This empowers and equips the poor to make their own choices and build their way out of poverty in a sustained and self-determined way.”¹⁰ Criticism for micro-credit claim that it is on too small of a scale to make a significant difference, and that it does not give the poor the power to break the cycle of poverty in their own lives. In many cases, however, these same people often times invest their earnings into their community despite such claims.

Although my experience in Africa took place solely in Kenya, I interacted with a diverse culture that carefully preserved its rich history, while maintaining a hopeful pride in the future of their nation and their continent. The capital city of Nairobi is reflective of the influence of globalization in Kenya, and the African continent in general. There is a huge divide between the wealthy and the poor, and similar to American city planning and development, the wealthiest neighborhoods are situated at the top of hills, complete with first class shopping destinations.

Juxtaposed to this lifestyle of luxury is a mix of low income and impoverished communities in pockets throughout Nairobi. The Kibera slums in Kenya are one of the world's largest slum neighborhoods. In the few weeks prior to our visit, there had been a series of robberies in Kibera so we were cautious, and hired two armed mercenaries to walk us through the neighborhoods. After forty-five minutes, we arrived at a primary school that benefitted from the work of micro-enterprise. The headmaster welcomed us with fresh fruit, roasted nuts, and chai tea. Before we ate, his wife went around the table carrying a pitcher of water and a basin to clean our hands. The headmaster explained that the school recently suffered severe budget cuts that affected the school, teachers, and students. The budget cuts affected the amount of food given to the students, which created a lack of focus during school from hunger. The headmaster, his wife, and the teachers are the real heroes of Africa. These heroes have committed themselves to educating young Kenyans in the hope that they will make a better life in the future. The West glamorizes aid to Africa, which often overlooks all the unsung men and women that are making a positive difference on their own.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Littlefield, Jonathan Murdutch, and Syed Hashemi, *Is Microfinance an Effective Strategy to Reach the Millennium Development Goals?* (manuscript, 2003), http://www.mikrofinanzwiki.de/file/570/is_mf_an_effective_strategy_to_reach_the_mdg_2003.pdf.



Figure 1: Students looking outside the window, local primary school in Kikuyu, Kenya. Photo by Danielle Jones.

While walking through Kibera, many Kenyans were amazed to see us. The adults acted as if they had encountered a ghost. Children from other schools would rush to the windows yelling with excitement and disbelief that Westerners were walking through Kibera. I distinctly remember one boy shouting out “It’s like a movie!” We asked one of the mercenaries why their reaction was so strong. He explained that Kenyans rarely see *mzungu*'s or Westerners, in Kibera traveling on foot. Westerners that travel through Kibera typically use tourist companies that travel by bus. Tourists take pictures of the extreme poverty but never step out of their buses to speak with Kenyans. The process is called “slumming.” Tour companies promote what they call “the other side touring Kenya.” The act of slumming is offensive to the people living in Kibera. Tourist “observing” life in a Kenyan slum promotes a mentality of “us versus them” towards Africans. Slumming as a tourist attraction was one of the most heart-breaking things I witnessed in Kenya.

Although development projects have not been successful in improving lives, my experience with participatory development is that it can make a long-lasting positive difference in a community. While in Nairobi, I had the honor of meeting several people that were benefitting from micro-enterprise, but one story in particular speaks to the power these companies have to transform entire communities. As we drove through the unpaved red dirt road slums of Nairobi, Kenyans would walk along the side of the van tapping the window yelling “Mzungu! Mzungu!” When we finally reached Gongga Waya Designs workshop

there was nothing about the building that would denote anything extraordinary.

Abel, the founder of Gongga Waya, started his business in the living room of the house he shared with his wife and daughter. Barely able to gain enough profit to feed his family once a day, he was surviving but not to his business' full potential. After joining forces with *Heavenly Treasures*, Abel was able to move his business out of the family living room and into a permanent workshop. He currently employs eight year round employees and over the holiday season he hires over five times that amount. The result is over 500 people benefit directly from employment opportunities through his company. He went from an annual income of US\$500 to making over US\$40,000 a year. Within the first few minutes spent talking with Abel, he conveyed a profound sense of gratitude to God. After meeting Abel, I could not help, but feel humbled by his work.

The next part of my visit to Kenya was spent in the village of Kakuyuni, in the Kumba part of the country. International micro-credit organizations tend to target women, because globally, women typically have less economic opportunities and greater difficulty acquiring loans. Women also tend to be more likely than their male-counter parts to invest their earnings back into the community.¹¹ Although *Heavenly Treasures* does not exclusively assist women, in Kakuyuni, a rural town in Kenya, the group has partnered with the Sisal Sisters. Sisal is an agave botanical species where sisal weaving is a traditional craft in Kenya. The Sisal sisters weave beautiful bags and baskets with a variety of patterns and colors. It began with one woman, in Kakuyuni, and in less than ten years, they have grown to a group of almost 40 grandmothers. These women are on their second round of parenting, raising their grandchildren, on account that their own children have died of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. These women typically care for anywhere from six to ten children each, and collectively care for over two hundred children. The Sisal Sister's work is hard (they have calloused hands), and support the future of Kenya. Each of the women possesses a hopefulness that transcends their external circumstances. They have become completely self-sustaining with a stable source of income.

¹¹ Littlefield, et. al.



Figure 2: Sisal Sister Ester, at her home in Kukuyni, Kenya. Photo by Danielle Jones.

Along with spending time with the Sisal Sisters, I had the honor of meeting several of the children and adolescents that they care for in Kakuyuni. Along the walls of the school were various charts, one was titled “Academic Board of Honour,” that celebrated the top students in English, Swahili, Chemistry, Biology, and Physics. Another sign had the schools motto that simply stated “Education Enlightens.” All of the students had plans to attend universities, and the majority of them dreamed of being chemist or do tors.

The last part of my trip was spent on the safari through the resort called Kichwa Tembo. Kichwa Tembo is a five-star oasis in the middle of a beautiful nature reservation in Kenya. A tour guide picked my team up in Nairobi and drove us across six grueling hours of rocky terrain into a region of Kenya that is occupied by the Masai. The Masai are famous for their draped red clothing and complex bead work. They have become one the most recognizable ancient cultures in the world. Our travel guide warned us not to take any pictures as we traveled through the Masai land on account that the Masai would write down the license plate of the car; leaving the guide responsible for the picture taken. He explained that the Masai would pose for a picture, but monetary compensation would be demanded.



Figures 3 and 4: View from the windshield on our way to Safari, and Giraffes during the evening Safari, Masai Mara National Reserve, Kenya. Photos by Danielle Jones.

The safari was broken into two parts. We went out with our guide at sunset, and again, at dawn the next day. After the evening safari and dinner, we were all gathered around a campfire for the evening's entertainment. There were people all over Europe and a few fellow

Americans. No one was sure what to expect, but out from the bushes, we heard the sounds of animal calls. Then young men wearing traditional Masai dress came out from the dark and began performing a traditional dance. They slowly came to a pause in which one of them stepped forward and introduced the group. He said that the dance they would be performing was the traditional coming of age dance for a young Masai warrior. They proceeded to dance and took turns jumping. Although their performance was absolutely incredible, it also left me with a heavy sense of irony. The Masai are so famous for its rich history, and yet they willing to sell performances of sacred dances to foreigners like myself. The Masai are aware of Westerners fascination with traditional African culture that they capitalized on it to fit the role assigned to them by the West.



Figure 5: Masai Warrior Performance, Kichwa Tembo, Masai Mara National Reserve, Kenya. Photo by Danielle Jones.

The way in which Africa is portrayed in the West as exotic and in turmoil is a perception that has lingered for generations. Unlike the early colonists who were unaware of African culture, we must take the time to understand and respect Africa. We have to stop demanding that Africa Westernize in order to meet the modern demands of world powers. Kenya, like so much of Africa's inhabitants, have a diverse past and a very bright future.

Despite the centuries of Western influence in Kenya, the influence of Arab culture is still prevalent in Kenya. This influence becomes clear when examining language. As previously mentioned, the ability to communicate cross-culturally became essential to trade between the two groups. To this day, Kenya maintains two official languages, English and Swahili. Swahili is a mix between various African languages and Arabic. Beyond language, evidence of Arab

influence in Kenya can be found in the cuisine and style of dress. While in Kenya, almost every meal I ate included chapati and chai tea. Both trace their roots to India, both are staples in the Kenyan diet, and both were introduced to Kenya centuries ago. Even the style of clothing worn in Kenya shares indisputable similarities to clothing styles often worn throughout parts of India and the Middle East.

As state earlier, the deepest flaw with aid programs is that they continue to create African reliance on Western nations, both politically and economically. Although the term “colonization” is not applied to the outside involvement in Africa today, the continuous exploitation of Africa's resources and people remains the leading cause crippling the continent. If Africa is ever to be given a fair chance at competing on the global political and economic stage, Africans must govern the African way, rather than the ways outside forces (Whether that be corporations or foreign governments). In the past twenty years or so, the use of micro-enterprise has emerged as a way to empower individuals that otherwise would not have access to business and possess limited employment opportunities. *Heavenly Treasures* expands on the talent and work ethic of the people they partner with. These partnerships put the power to transform communities into the hands of the people that live within those communities.

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