

Conceptualizing/ Re-conceptualizing Africa

The Construction of African Historical Identity

INTRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

How do we know Africa? How do we come to understand it? A key may lie in what, at first glance, appear to be several disparate essays. Yet, these essays from their very beginning evoke William Edward Burghardt Du Bois on the invention of identity in the modern world. In that light, these works remind us, as Du Bois would, that the current invention of Africa is indeed a modern one; an identity configured in numerous ways, with and without our interventions. These essays address this issue in terms of the ways in which Africa has been conceptualized, and, therefore, might be re-conceptualized. That, in part, is their challenge to the reader. Here, the explorations of that conceptualization and re-conceptualization range from East to West, and delve into internal and external possibilities. The essays also engage the ways in which the peoples we have come to identify as African might identify and define themselves. These pieces also speak to the uses to which these identities and definitions might be put.

The broader themes struck here will have resonance for many readers. The impact of Edward Said's *Orientalism* is apparent as are the notions so compellingly put forth by Valentine Mudimbe in both the *Invention* and the *Idea of Africa*. Again the broadness of the themes embraced here also reflects the positioning of Africa in the world, and the essays of this volume are contributions to the history of the world as well. We are made aware of the fact that Africa was conceptualized and is re-conceptualized within the context of the world. To evoke Du Bois once more, we are made cognizant not only of *The World and Africa*, but of Africa and the

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World, and Africa *in* the world. In that regard, some modernist predispositions are jettisoned in regard to the misconceptions of Africa's isolation at any point in time.

These challenges have both historiographic and epistemological import. As Jesse Benjamin points out, at least one historiographic variant is that of "anti-colonial historiography." The attendant essays show that there are even still more ways of writing the histories of Africa, of conceptualizing and re-conceptualizing it.

Lamont King's work on the Hausa allows that there is more complexity to the multiplicity and construction of African identity than readily meets the conventional eye. "Ethnic," "tribal," "religious," "regional," and "national" affiliations are not quite as facile as they have been portrayed elsewhere. King's work bears witness to the insight of E. Ann McDougall (1985) on the dynamism and fluidity of identity construction in the African context. King, like McDougall, references the question of function in the determination of who and what groups of individuals might consider themselves to be within the context of Africa. In noting that "the ethnically constituted state" is the "exception" rather than the rule in Africa, King initiates an engagement with one of the most fundamental historiographic and epistemological tenets of the modern age: ethnic and racial construction. Here, he questions if they are indeed an *a priori* condition for the construction of the early modern state in Africa.

While King's work may be interpreted as speaking to the specificity of identity in this process of conceptualization and re-conceptualization, its parameters are global as well. Read alongside Jesse Benjamin's historical analysis of the hazy, often unexplored relations between the Nabateans and the Nubians, the globality of this volume becomes fixed in both spatial and temporal senses. While our contemporary methods of analysis may be removed by time and space from the subjects, the subjects themselves still have voice and provide a much fuller characterization of who and what they thought themselves to be. In this light, Benjamin's essay emphasizes the historiographic and epistemological issues that frame this volume.

Benjamin's fascination with both pre-colonial and anti-colonial historiographies opens new approaches to the writing of the histories of ancient Africa and the world. Like King's approach, Benjamin's work is a commentary on the complexity and sophistication of African political economic structures and what they might suggest of agency and state formation. Benjamin's notion of "re-writing" the present through the re-configuration of the past mirrors King's questions concerning the facility with which many of us have embraced the concept of ethnic identity in Africa. Benjamin provides new nuances for the chronological and spatial expansion of African history in relation to what we might term the "ancient" world. Jeremy Prestholdt provides similar insights in his treatment of the Swahili