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## Postcolonial or Not? West Africa in the Pre-Atlantic and Atlantic Worlds

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- 1 The increasing recognition of Africa in the early Atlantic world was not simply description of culture histories, but the examination of the theoretical relevance of these early interconnections to the modern world. Africa emerged both as a place of autonomous development and as an integral part of the world economic system.<sup>1</sup> Also inherent in many of the emerging studies of the non-Western world were critiques of the metanarratives produced by the former colonial powers. Walter Rodney published *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* in 1972. Recognition of the wider economic structure of the Atlantic world was coupled with increasing appreciation of regional variation, the distinctive character of cultural manifestations, and locally shaped trajectories, examples being Joseph Inikori's volume *Forced Migration* and Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History*.<sup>2</sup> On one hand these studies seek to chart the impacts of European expansion and hegemony on African societies and the wider non-Western world. On the other, they are more broadly concerned with revealing the histories of the "native" societies with which Europe interacted and whose stories had often been untold in dominate historiographies.
- 2 Postcolonialism and subaltern studies emerged as defined foci of research during the last three decades of the twentieth century and they have become pervasive themes in the social sciences. While they share aspects of conceptual vantage and have to some extent been conflated in many writings, they nonetheless have distinct intellectual histories, theoretical underpinnings, and current usage. Postcolonialism emerged in the decades following the independence of nations that had been colonized by Europe. It is not, however, a temporal period beginning after independence,<sup>3</sup> but rather the engagement with and destabilization of the power relations, social hierarchies, and metanarratives of the former colonial powers. European hegemony and imperialism are central to postcolonial theory and, subsequently, the interrelationships of Europe and the non-Western world are central areas of study. Although Edward Said's [1968] *Orientalism* is often viewed as foundational to postcolonial scholarship, similar themes, including many of the nuances of theoretical framing, had been articulated earlier by other writers, West African examples being Chinua Achebe [1959], Kenneth Onwuku

Dike [1956],<sup>4</sup> Cheikh Anta Diop [1960],<sup>5</sup> and especially Jacob Festus Ade Ajayi [1961a, 1961b, 1968].<sup>6</sup> Subaltern Studies emerged in the 1970s with a group of English and Indian historians interested in providing views of the colonial past from the perspective of the colonized rather than the colonizers. Subaltern perspectives seek to give voice to the lives of marginalized populations such as newly arrived immigrants, the impoverished, and women.<sup>7</sup> It has subsequently been incorporated into postcolonial studies by scholars working on other formerly colonized areas particularly Latin America, the Caribbean and, to a lesser extent, southern and east Africa.<sup>8</sup> Both terms have become widely used across the social sciences.

- 3 While some researchers have viewed postcolonialism and subaltern studies as having clear definitional parameters, the terms have become increasingly ambiguous with regard to their theoretical positionality, conceptual framing, and application.<sup>9</sup> Hence, for example, the contributions in Peter Schmidt's edited volume, *Postcolonial Archaeologies in Africa*, range widely in terms of their engagement with specific postcolonial and subaltern literature. On one hand they confront the legacies of colonial infrastructure, and how these have shaped and continue to shape the practice of archaeology in Africa.<sup>10</sup> On the other, stories of young West African academics that have been marginalized and given limited access to resources reflect both colonial legacies and the power dynamics of post-independence Francophone West Africa. As Roderick McIntosh observes, some asymmetries of power were inherited wholesale from the colonial experience, while others were created anew,<sup>11</sup> a postcolonial vantage thus becoming a trope for any marginalized voices in historical reconstruction both within and outside of contexts of European colonization and hegemony.
- 4 With regard to West Africa, mapping of the postcolonial landscape is particularly challenging. While sharing an Atlantic past and transition to modernity, the colonial and independence experiences represented across the region are by no means uniform in terms of the indigenous sociocultural institutions present, the contact settings represented, and the historical trajectories followed. Individual colonial enterprises were quite varied and fluid; "an incomplete suite of experimental projects and ideological justifications".<sup>12</sup> The entire African continent was partitioned into spheres of influence and it can thus be said to be one of the most thoroughly colonized regions of the world. Yet compared to some world areas, the period of formal colonial rule in West Africa was relatively brief. The first British Crown Colony was established on the Freetown peninsula, Sierra Leone in 1808 as a homeland for freed slaves. Most other European colonies were not established until the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.<sup>13</sup> This did not minimize European hegemonic impacts and their legacies. While the imposition of colonial rule came in the nineteenth century, the process of Africa's incorporation into an increasingly global economy and the generation of narratives of Africa's positionality *vis à vis* the colonial powers began long before.<sup>14</sup>
- 5 The history of scholarship with regard to the different nation states of West Africa has also been dramatically different; this in and of itself being a colonial legacy.<sup>15</sup> The areas that today have some of the most developed university and research infrastructures are ones that were the locations of early colonial research centres, including the *Institut Français de l'Afrique Noire* (now the *Institut Fondamental de l'Afrique Noire*) in Dakar, the University of Ghana at Legon, and the University of Ibadan.<sup>16</sup> There are now dozens of practicing archaeologists in these areas, in stark contrast to areas such as Sierra Leone, the Gambia, and Liberia which have no indigenous archaeologists or related

infrastructure. The paucity of knowledge about Atlantic and pre-Atlantic history has dramatic implications for the interpretation of the past: In Sierra Leone, history texts – written by Europeans and Sierra Leoneans alike – out of necessity, largely begin with the European arrival and primarily focus on the African polities and transformations during Atlantic period.<sup>17</sup> “History” only emerges through the lense of the increasing prevalence of European documentary source material. These views of the African past lie in stark contrast to areas such as Nigeria where archaeological research at sites such as Igbo Ukwu, Ife, Benin City, and Old Oyo are testament to African technological, cultural, and sociopolitical complexity long pre-dating European contact.

- 6 Regardless of the disparities in scholarly research across the region, it is clear that the study of Atlantic world has become an important if not the predominant theme in studies of the West African past. This is the result of trends in both academic research and popular history. West African scholarship to some extent parallels the focus on colonial and post-colonial history (here referring to the post-colonial, independence era) and the expansion of “historical” archaeology as a discrete area of study in other world areas. The development and marketing of heritage tourism specifically aimed at Africans in the Diaspora and projects such as the UNESCO Slaves Routes Project has also resulted in increasing interest in the history, traditions, and archaeology of sites associated with the period of the Atlantic trade; especially in Ghana, Benin, and the Senegambia.<sup>18</sup> The refocusing of archaeological research on these areas has come at the expense of other research, such as ethnohistory, and Iron Age and Stone Age studies.<sup>19</sup>In a similar vein, historical research has increasingly focused on the history of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>20</sup>This conceptual reframing has implications for the types of research and source materials considered.<sup>21</sup> To some extent the analytical and methodological approaches utilized, as well as accumulation of the relevant substantive data, have not developed in tandem with the theoretical and conceptual themes explored.

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## NOTES

1. For example, the intersection with Europe was integral to Wallerstein's (1976:4) formulation of world-system theory. For a review African history and its transformation in the context of world histories see Feierman (1993).
2. Joseph Inikori 1982; Eric Wolf 1982.
3. It is, however, often used in this sense in African history, the “Post-Colonial Period” following the “Pre-Colonial” and “Colonial” periods.
4. Also see Nwaubani 2000.
5. Also see Holl 1990; 1995.
6. Also see Ajaye and Smith 1964; Hess 1971.
7. E.g. Spivak 1988. The revealing of subaltern voices was integral to postcolonial studies but Spivak (1988) problematized the idea of retrieving them.

8. E.g. Cooper 1994; Ludden 2002; Temu and Swai 1981. Postcolonialism as a theoretical vantage explicitly labeled as such has not been a central theme in West African scholarship, but has received some attention, as discussed below (see Holl 2009; McIntosh 2009).

9. Ludden 2002; Munene and Schmidt 2010; Schmidt and Patterson 1995.

10. Schmidt 2009a. In particular see the chapters by Schmidt (2009a:4–6); Holl (2009); and McIntosh (2009: 118–124). Also see Croucher and Weiss 2011; Munene and Schmidt 2010; Schmidt and Patterson 1995; Schmidt and Walz 2007a, 2007b.

11. McIntosh 2009: 116. For McIntosh (2009: 117) the ultimate goals of a postcolonial archaeology are: “The fullest, unencumbered investigation of the African contribution to the variety of human responses to social, environmental, and cognitive change; 2) The honest dissemination of that knowledge so that it can be ‘presented’ for the ultimate improvement of the lives of African peoples; 3) The widest dissemination of that knowledge elsewhere in the world so that African alternatives can help suggest counter versions of causation and sequences in distant regions perhaps still constrained by standard narratives of prehistory.”

12. Richard 2011: 211.

13. Pakenham 1991.

14. Dike's (1956) seminal work on the Niger Delta affords a nuanced view of the progression from the economic imperialism of the precolonial period to formal colonial control.

15. See Robertshaw (1990), especially chapters by de Barros (1990); Holl (2009) and Kense (1990).

16. Posnansky 1982; Robertshaw 1990; Holl 2009.

17. E.g. Alie 1990: 31; Fyfe 1962b. Fyfe (1981:7) discusses the potential contribution of archaeology, but underscores the limited work undertaken. The paucity of documentary evidence for early Atlantic history has led some scholars to suggest that Sierra Leone was occupied by hunter gatherers until the formation of the first settled agricultural communities between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries (Siddle 1968, 1969; cf. DeCorse 2012). In fact, archaeological data, particularly from Yengema Cave in southern Sierra Leone, suggest occupation for at least the last 10,000 years, with indirect evidence for agriculture (ground stone celts and ceramics) dating to between the second and third millennium AD (Coon 1968).

18. DeCorse 2008a; Schramm 2010.

19. Holl 2009: 140–141.

20. Chouin 2012.

21. The increasing focus by historians on the colonial or postcolonial periods in part is driven by the comparative paucity of documentary source material for earlier time periods.