

A Conversation Between Africa and the World

by Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch

Religious dialogue, trade, slave mobility, knowledge circulation, pilgrimage and intellectual exchange, colonization, resistance, creolization: Africans have been connected to the rest of the world in every possible way.

About: François-Xavier Fauvelle and Anne Lafont (eds), *L'Afrique et le monde: histoires renouvelées. De la préhistoire au XXIe siècle*, Paris, La Découverte, 2022, 437 p., 28 €.

L'Afrique et le monde (Africa and the World) is a remarkable book in every way: It is ambitious in scope, voluminous yet reasonably priced, innovative, clear, and elegantly written. Although the contributors are rather numerous (thirteen in total) and hail from different parts of the world, including Africa, the result is harmonious and pleasant to read. The book purports to offer “an interactive history of Africa and the world,” and the challenge is met.

“Insubordination as a Relationship to the World”

Africa exists because of the world, and the world because of Africa. “One must constantly recall that the pasts of Africa, African societies, and Afro-descendant communities have always been present to the world” (p. 7), which is why the

introduction of the book insists on presenting this history as an almost incessant “conversation” between Africa and the world.

Obviously, the book cannot pretend to tell the whole story in less than 500 pages; so many studies have been published on African history that it is no longer worth the trouble. For the most part, the analyses are concise, detailed, judiciously framed, and exhaustive in their coverage of periods and facts of history. With a few exceptions, event-driven history is avoided. Chapters have a regional, general, or local focus, as appropriate.

To take one example, the chapter devoted to “colonization: Africa’s being-in-the-world” (Pascale Barthélémy, pp. 229-252) manages to cover in just a few pages the temporality of events, the forced compartmentalization at the root of multiple “contact zones,” and the experience of “insubordination as a relationship to the world”—a density of information authorized by six pages of detailed notes. This small *tour de force* spans the period from the late 19th century to the 1960s-1970s.

Other chapters are worthy of note. The chapter on “African archives of the world” (François Bon and François-Xavier Fauvelle, pp. 17-44) describes fossil imprints, languages, and prehistoric narratives, while also signaling the cultural mosaic they formed. The following chapter, devoted to “commercial flows and religious interactions from 2500 B.C. to 1500 A.D.” (Marie-Laure Derat, pp. 45-71), goes straight to the heart of this “common home”: Egypt, Aksum, the area from the Mediterranean Sea to the inland states, elephants, slaves, the birth of monotheism—nothing is left out.

The ensuing discussion of East and Southern Africa is unfortunately brief and centered on the early period. Atlantic Africa is somewhat privileged, which is perfectly understandable for a book primarily aimed at Western readers. Even so, Islam and West Africa are thoroughly explored from the inside—before, during, and after colonization—in a chapter devoted to “intellectual history” (Souleymane Bachir Diagne, pp. 73-88).

Attention is likewise paid to slavery and the religious dialogue between Christianity and Islam. Thus, the next chapter describes how flows linked to the slave trade, pilgrimage, and intellectual exchange superimposed themselves on commercial flows, while also connecting all Africans to the rest of the world. Here we see how from the 15th to the 19th century, the construction of the Atlantic market definitively linked the African market to the global market (Anne Ruderman, pp. 91-122).

This leads to a discussion of the linkages between the Atlantic, domestic, and Mediterranean markets, all of them characterized by multiple ramifications. The argument is supported by an impressive number of up-to-date references—as is also the case in the other chapters.

From the African Renaissance to the Future of Africa

We then move on to a series of innovative and welcome chapters aimed at tracing the trajectories of African cultures in the world.

The next chapter focuses on the Atlantic World: It describes the circulation of slaves, knowledge and know-how, skills and artworks, ivory and gold pieces, since the 15th century, and it demonstrates the influence of Africa on colonial baroque and “performance art.” Mention is also made of the maroons—these communities of runaway slaves who built a society in the mountainous or forested hinterlands of colonial territories—and of the creolization unfolding on African soil (Anne Lafont, pp. 123-171).

These processes have fostered a stylization of existence in a gigantic space. For Africanity in diaspora is inventive, diverse yet common, and it has largely contributed to creating a feeling of belonging that has brought forth throughout the world a mythical land of origins: Africa. This fascinating chapter is illustrated with a wealth of representative images.

We are then invited to consider the corollary of this plural diaspora: the history of Pan-Africanisms. Yet, we are also told about this history’s antithesis: With the African Renaissance, Africans sought to rid themselves of “the father’s smell” so as to “imagine the future from the perspective of Africa” (Sarah Fila-Bakabadio, pp. 173-198).

The book, however, does not promise a radiant future: It presents all of the obstacles, but also the available tools. The following chapter offers a description of “predation in paradise.” Here we see how the gaze of others (explorers, conquerors, all types of collectors) forced Africa to serve as “the nostalgia and the ecological laboratory of the world” from the 18th to the 21st century (Guillaume Blanc, pp. 199-228).

A detour via “plant colonialism” (p. 205) takes us to the construction of the savage poacher, a conception of the human that “the West needed in order to construct itself.” The chapter shows how African flora and fauna became the object of incessant predation: Lisbon, Paris, Brussels, Berlin, and London were all adorned with lush and exotic botanical gardens. In the first decades of the 20th century, plant conservation went hand in hand with predatory violence.

We are then exposed, a little late in the chapter, to the violence of the Afrikaners. The latter is illustrated by the history of the expropriation of Kruger Park in South Africa (p. 213): Politicians and scientists joined forces to ban forestry and agro-pastoral practices so as to exclude indigenous populations from the “national parks.” This colonial violence was reproduced everywhere in the form of compulsory cultivation and, ultimately, in the idea that Africa is an Eden that ought to be protected from its own inhabitants.

All of this is true, but an obvious explanatory element is missing: demographic change. The chapter briefly considers the harmful effects of this phenomenon in connection with the slave trade. However, it fails to mention the demographic boom that has taken place in South Africa since the early 20th century (in this case as a result of colonial conquest) and in tropical Africa since the 1950s. Africa’s rapid population growth has been cited in countless studies, but without consideration of its (colonial) causes or potential solutions. This issue would have merited constructive discussion in the book, especially in a chapter that addresses the colonial question.

Repairing History?

The last two chapters are perhaps the most original. They deal with sources and methods that are still too often neglected and that concern key witnesses to contemporary African history. First, a chapter on photography: How can one write African histories of photography on the continent while respecting their diversity and multiple scales? Who will write these histories, for which audiences, and using which archives? (Éruka Nimis and Marian Nur Goni, pp. 253-281)

There are fragments and there are intermediaries. There is also the need to revisit the European canon and to practice visual self-writing so as to rediscover the singular lives that lie beyond the colonial uses of photography. The sources used in this chapter lead to a reflection on how images can serve as instruments of power or counter-power.

An original feature of African cultures is explored in the next chapter, which is devoted to “speech as a political model beyond writing and orality” (Jean Godefroy Bidima, pp. 283-311). Words and palavers have always played an important political role in Africa, whether constructive or destructive. They are like “clay that can be molded according to the symbolic needs of our societies” (p. 306). And indeed, despite the pervasiveness of today’s communication technologies, Africans have “not been able to put orality aside.”

The conclusion (“Black memories in the world,” Ana Lucia Araujo, pp. 313-335) and the epilogue (“Can history be repaired in the 21st century?,” François-Xavier Fauvelle and Anne Lafont, pp. 337-345) raise key questions from the perspective of Africa. These concern African’s way of shaping memories (especially that of slavery), but also their presences and absences (from militant action to official recognition). Here it is emphasized (somewhat belatedly) that the slave trade, and especially the Atlantic slave trade, was “the founding event of anti-black racism in Africa, Europe, and the Americas” (p. 331).

The book therefore legitimately addresses current issues of restitution and reparations. Yet, while it alludes to the compensation paid by France to former slave owners in 1848, it says nothing of the exhaustive calculations performed to establish the amount of the compensation paid by the British to their planters, even though these equally fabulous sums were mainly used to finance the industrial revolution then underway in Great Britain.¹ This is one of the rare literature gaps of the book.

The fact remains that *L’Afrique et le monde* achieves its objective:

Accessing the reality of African societies with all the tools of history is a clear necessity, against the preconceived idea that the entire African continent is stuck in a pre-modern past and can therefore be made intelligible only by means of traditional ethnography (p. 338).

This obvious point is splendidly demonstrated, not through an exhaustive analysis, but through a series of up-to-date and clearly presented arguments and syntheses that have no equivalent in the French-language literature. In short, I thoroughly enjoyed this book, which I read without skipping a line—however much of a “specialist in African history” I may be.

¹ Catherine Hall, *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of the Victorian Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

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