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CHAPTER ONE

# Introducing the Issues and Themes

BARELY MORE THAN fifty thousand years ago, the primary ancestors of every single human being alive today lived in eastern Africa.<sup>1</sup> World history to that point *was* African history.

What seems less generally understood is that, just because some Africans left the continent around that time, and their descendants eventually expanded across the rest of the globe, history did not come to a halt in Africa. Those of our ancestors who continued to inhabit the common ancestral homelands of us all, in the eastern parts of Africa, did not fall out of time into some kind of ahistorical stasis. They, too, expanded their cultures and ways of life into new lands, between fifty thousand and twenty thousand years ago, spreading westward and southward out of our common East African homeland regions and establishing themselves across the rest of the continent.

In subsequent ages Africans did not live somewhere off the edge of the human historical world we all belong to. They participated in and contributed in integral fashion to the developments

that brought into being the world we now all live in. The great transitions of early world history—

the major early technological breakthroughs;  
the shift from foraging to agricultural economies;  
the emergence of towns—and of states;  
the advent of commercial exchange over distance—

all unfolded in Africa during the same broad periods as elsewhere in the world. And these developments took shape across large parts of the continent and not just along its northern fringes.

Moreover, Africa, as the origin land of us all, is the most diverse continent in its human genetics. The peoples of the rest of the world, whose ancestors began spreading outward from Africa fifty thousand or more years ago, form essentially one subset of that African diversity.

And yet the integral intertwining of Africa's past with the overall movements of early world history seems often still not recognized—not because the historical sources and historical information are not there but because of a lack of engagement by too many historians with the full sweep of that body of information and, also, because of sadly persistent and wrong presumptions of the lack of salience of Africa to broader human history before the slave trade. The horrific rationalizations of slavers and slave owners and all the others who benefited from slavery—their appalling, self-justifying myths about Africa as a continent of backward, “uncivilized,” and, most horrifically, inherently inferior peoples—live on even today, unexamined in the minds of far too many people around the world. Until we begin to fully integrate Africa into the history we teach everybody, we are not going to finally dispel those baseless assumptions. These are modes of thinking that we continually need to confront and, sooner rather than later, finally and forever eradicate from all our cultural understandings.

So how do we more fully integrate Africa and Africans into our global histories of humankind? How might we organize our

history-telling so that each chapter as we move forward in time tells its stories in a fashion that fully accounts for developments in the continent and integrates them into our broader syntheses of history around the globe—so that each chapter of our world history covers a particular broad time span and, at the same time, is truly global in its coverage?

What if we centered our stories on culture and society? What if our focus were on exploring all the variety of ways people around the world, over each succeeding historical age, readapted their lives, activities, social relations, religious beliefs, and material culture—in parallel or in different fashions—to cope with the changing circumstances, natural and cultural, of the world around them? Patrick Manning's new book, *A History of Humanity*, deserves particular attention in this respect.<sup>2</sup> It is a groundbreaking advance in applying those kinds of perspectives to both the very *longue durée* of our common human past and to recent centuries. Telling history in this fashion offers historians new ways for bringing in, as integral actors in the overall human story, not just Africa and Africans, but the peoples of boreal Eurasia, the Americas, the islands of South Asia, and Oceania.

Germane to these issues, I see no value in the artificial separation of our human story into something called “history” and something else called “prehistory.” Whatever human beings have done in the past is history. It is not something restricted to places and times with written records. Archaeology and, as we shall see, historical linguistics, together with the long-established historical methods of comparative ethnography, provide powerful tools for revealing the changing material, social, cultural, and religious practices and ideas of peoples of times far back into the past and for establishing the broad chronologies of those histories.

The term “ancient” is used here with the deliberate aim of giving it a global applicability and of extending its chronological scope much farther back in time than the usual applications to such regions of the world as, for example, the Mediterranean and

the Middle East. For my purposes here, “ancient” in its broadest sense applies to all the ages from the beginnings of human expansion around the world down to the first three centuries CE, although having particular reference to the periods from the Last Glacial Maximum of a bit more than twenty thousand years ago down to the early first millennium CE. Applying these kinds of perspectives allows me to propose five historical periods from the initial emergence of fully modern humans through the end of the “ancient” era in 300 CE.

*68,000 to 20,000 BCE.* This initial, long period extends from the emergence in East Africa of the first *fully* modern human communities down through the varied stories of how their descendants spread out across the world. The key initiating development marking the inception of that first age in our story—the defining development that distinguishes the fully modern ancestors of us all from all the other hominin groups—was the creation and adoption for the first time of fully syntactical language. Chapter 6 has more to say about how that uniquely human capacity served as the crucial enabling factor for the spread of humanity around the globe.

The stories of this initiating age spotlight how, in different world regions, the diverse cultural and social ideas and practices of our ancestors took shape and how the communities of those times changed and developed their technologies and food-gathering practices in response to the challenges of the widely differing environments into which they moved. It was the age in which the imagery and symbols of the common early human religion of shamanism came to be expressed, eventually around the world, in rock art. Very early in this age, as well, our human ancestors brought about a major technological advance, namely, the inventions of the first two types of composite projectile weaponry, the bow and arrow and the spear-thrower or atlatl.

Telling these stories would require giving full attention also to the generally neglected but equally important history, during this same long age, of the spread of fully modern humans westward

and southward out of the common origin lands of us all in eastern Africa and eventually across the rest of the continent. In Africa, just as in Eurasia, the expansions of our ancestors eventually everywhere replaced their not-quite-fully-modern hominin predecessors. Imparting that history turns out to be its own complex of stories.<sup>3</sup>

*20,000–9700 BCE.* A new, long, global historical age, characterized by multiple shifts in human adaptations to the world around them, then began from around the height of the Last Glacial Maximum and lasted until the beginning of the Holocene epoch around 9700 BCE. During that period human beings nearly everywhere had to adapt and then readapt their ways of life and their subsistence practices to cope with repeated shifts between cooler and warmer climatic phases, as well as shifts between drier and wetter rainfall regimes.

*9700–5000 BCE.* A third big thematic period, it can be proposed, extended from the start of the Holocene epoch at around 9700 until around 5500 BCE. Notable climatic fluctuations ushered in the Holocene in most parts of the world. Bringing about major changes in natural environments, these shifts compelled people around the globe to substantially readapt their ways of obtaining food. Most significant of all, people living in as many as eleven or twelve separate and far-flung regions of the world began, independently and stage by stage, to move from hunting and gathering practices to food production—that is to say, from foraging to the deliberate cultivation of crops and raising of livestock. Africans of this era, living in parts of the continent distant from one another, were the independent innovators of at least three of those separate inventions of agricultural ways of life.

*6000 to 3000 BCE.* A new era, partially overlapping with the age of early agriculture, then took shape from around 6000 to 3000 BCE, a period that we might call the era of agricultural exchange. Sometimes even before 6000 BCE, the inventors of these new ways of subsistence had begun to spread with their agricultural methods into new lands. Because of these early

expansions of farming peoples, agricultural systems innovated in one world region eventually began to come into contact with one or more systems innovated in other regions, and those encounters soon led to the diffusion of crops and animals from one system to another.

What gives coherence to this age of agricultural exchange is not the subsistence exchanges alone but the consequences of those processes for social and cultural history. The adoption of new crops and domestic animals enriched the productivity and variety of the agricultural practices of the regions they spread to. In consequence, the proportion of the diet derived from cultivation and herding progressively grew, and the proportion coming from collecting and hunting declined. This increased subsistence productivity enabled agricultural populations to continue to grow—and to grow not just in overall numbers but often in the sizes and densities of the residential groupings and, also in a few regions late in the era, in the size and centralization of the political formations that people belonged to.

*3000 BCE to 300 CE.* The ensuing period, of the last three millennia BCE and first three centuries CE, was marked by strikingly new developments in society, culture, and economy, along with as the persistence of several earlier historical trends. Notably, as population numbers and density grew in several world regions, larger scales of political organization took shape, with the emergence of kingdoms and, in time, empires. Over the same period, people in several areas of the world gradually readapted their crops and agricultural practices in ways that allowed them to spread their economies into areas with climates previously marginal to farming, such as northern temperate areas of North America and Europe and the rainforest zones of Africa and South America, and also, as in the case of the islands of Oceania, into areas sometimes previously uninhabited by humans.

In addition, from the early second millennium BCE onward, the new developments in technology, along with a growing variety in the goods manufactured by the peoples of different



regions, stimulated the rise for the first time of regular trade relations over long distances. By the first millennium BCE the expanding networks of long-distance exchange led, most notably, to the rippling out of the social, cultural, political, and communicational consequences of those developments more and more widely across the African-Eurasian portion of world.

The records of these histories, as already noted, are not just written. They include, for example in the African and Oceanic cases, oral traditions. Historical evidence emerges from the material finds of archaeology; from reconstructing the histories of ancient lexicons of culture, belief, and material life going back to different particular periods in the past;<sup>4</sup> with less precision, from the testimony of comparative ethnography, long used by anthropologists to unveil the ancient roots of more recent cultural practices;<sup>5</sup> and, most effectively, from bringing together the correlative findings of these different approaches. Genetics is a newly important resource, as well, although with interpretive problems of its own, as noted in chapter 5 and in the appendix.

World historians today increasingly do use the findings of archaeology in their works, but the other methods remain mostly unfamiliar. In African historical studies, in contrast, the correlative application of archaeological, historical linguistic, oral traditional, and comparative ethnographic evidence has already a long pedigree, with an extensive body of available work on the relevant methods and their findings.<sup>6</sup>

Through all those periods Africans were essential contributors to the defining trends and developments of human history. Even before the mid-twentieth century, there existed a significant body of evidence on early African history and its wider global connections, provided that one cared to look for it. Up until the 1960s, though, almost the only scholars who did pay such attention to Africa taught at Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the United States. They included not just the well-known William Leo Hansberry at Howard University but professors at other such colleges as well.

But then from the late 1950s and the early 1960s onward, the course of current world events began to change all that. The rise and growing success of independence movements all across Africa, along with the civil rights movement especially in the United States, stimulated a new growth of public and scholarly interest in Africa. Since then, scholarship, especially in the fields of history, historical linguistics, and archaeology, has immensely increased the body of available information on the African past, and courses in African history are now part of the curriculum at many if not most universities and colleges.

But can one say, even yet, that African history is being treated as an *integral* part of the discipline? In the revitalized field of world history, are developments in Africa integral to the overall story, or are they relegated to the add-ons? When African history courses are available at a university, what proportion of undergraduate history majors actually take those courses? And in those courses are teachers giving the same in-depth attention to the ancient periods in Africa that they give to the past few centuries?

So how do we take on these challenges?

First, we need to disseminate a wide historical awareness of what was going on among Africans during the long ages from the beginning of human expansion around the world down to the first three centuries CE. Every student needs to be introduced to human history as it unfolded in Africa in those eras with the same depth of attention and understanding that they currently receive about history elsewhere in the world.

We need to know, and to incorporate integrally into our presentation of world history, the common directionalities and developments that Africa shares with the wider human story of the early ages. To accomplish that, we must convey the facts about technology and invention in ancient Africa, about the export of innovation from the continent in the ancient eras, and about the early rise of African towns and networks of long-distance commercial exchange. These histories have major implications, not

just for the integration of Africa into world history, but for our understandings, as readers and writers of history, of our common human past worldwide. And, among other things, these developments have messages for us about the roles, contributions, and place of women in history.

In pursuit of these aims, chapters 2–5 set out some of the notable *longue durée*—that is to say, very long-term—developments that illuminate how history in ancient Africa moved along paths broadly parallel to contemporary courses of change in regions outside the continent; how those developments came to intersect with developments outside the continent; and—equally important—how those developments raise fundamental issues for our understandings of world history more generally. Chapter 2 explores notable cases of technological invention in Africa over the period from the close of the last Ice Age until the first millennium BCE and relates those developments to parallel courses of invention elsewhere in the world. Chapter 3 turns attention to the independent inventions of agricultural ways of life in Africa, taking place broadly over the same periods as the creation of such economies elsewhere in the world. This chapter brings attention, as well, to the spread, beginning in the age of agricultural exchange, of numerous African crops and one key animal, the donkey, to other world regions. Chapter 4 moves on to the seminal contributions of African merchants and tradespeople beginning in the second millennium BCE to the advent and spread of long-distance systems of commerce across the African-Eurasian macrocontinent. Each of these chapters compares changes in Africa with those in other parts of the world, showing the similarities and often the leadership of Africans in innovation.

Chapter 5 turns attention to a different kind of *longue durée* issue—to the task of correcting a view that still appears in many books on world history. This chapter, focusing on the Nile Valley, the Horn of Africa, and the eastern Sahara from earliest times, lays out the deeply African foundations of ancient Egyptian culture, beliefs, and institutions—findings that the archaeological

discoveries of the past four decades, backed up by linguistic historical studies, have now made abundantly clear.

More crucially, how do we then incorporate these complexities of ancient African history integrally into our telling of world history? To do so, we need to reshape our interpretive frameworks for understanding ancient world history as a whole. The closing chapter, “Africa and Africans in Early Global History,” relying on the same five periods of ancient world history listed above, takes up that task. It does so by proposing an extended rethinking of how we might present the themes of early world history in ways that both fully incorporate Africa and, at the same time, offer integrative perspectives on the human experience around the globe.

Bringing ancient Africa fully into world history does far more than just redress the long-standing neglect and disregard of major, fundamentally important components of our common human story. It not only opens up new vistas into the very long-term global interconnectedness of our world, but it also brings to bear additional bodies of evidence that can expand and deepen our historical knowledge, even for regions where early written documentation exists.

Most of all—as already noted—the long-term courses of history in Africa challenge us to rethink our understandings of how history unfolded in other regions around the globe. Taking this tack shines new light on a range of common assumptions about major connective themes in ancient world history, such as how, when, and where notable early technological transitions actually originated and then spread; when and where the varied transitions from foraging to agriculture took shape in different parts of the world; and when and where long-distance commerce earliest began to link distant regions to each other.

This approach raises questions, as well, for our understandings of ancient social history in different parts of the world; of the evolution of early religious belief systems; of gender and how it played out in the social and political relations of those times; and of the varied ways in which the institutions and organizing

beliefs and ideas of early, small-scale human societies were both co-opted and transformed in the emerging complex and stratified societies of the later ancient periods.<sup>7</sup>

From the beginning of the spread, fifty thousand or more years ago, of the fully modern human ancestors of all of us out of eastern Africa—both outward across the world outside Africa and also across the rest of the African continent—the paths of historical change within the continent paralleled and, especially from the early and middle Holocene epoch onward, *integrally fed into* wider global networks of change taking place right across the African-Eurasian macrocontinent. Globalization in its strongest and farthest-reaching forms may be a phenomenon of the recent centuries. But its earliest manifestations and effects go back thousands of years, and the African continent from the beginning fully linked into those wider emerging global trends.

Telling these stories can alert us to a related problem that we tend often not to be aware of, namely, the problem of where we plant our feet. Africa gets treated as peripheral because historians—and, too often, even historians *of* Africa based outside the continent—have not performed the informative and necessary exercise, metaphorically, of planting their feet in the middle of the African continent and looking outward from there at the long-term courses of historical change.<sup>8</sup>

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