

2000 AD: Dawn of the African century

ANYONE looking at the past century, or even the past millenium, would have to agree that it certainly has not been Africa's time to shine on the world stage.

A look at *Time* (USA edition), and its overview of great people and events of the last millenium exhibits that Americans feel Africa has contributed very little that is worthwhile.

In the popular American consciousness, the sum total of that contribution over the last 1,000 years appears to be not much more than the Atlantic Slave Trade and Nelson Mandela.

What does that mean for Africans, their history, and their future? Africa's history is the oldest, and also perhaps the least well known of any part of the world. It starts at the very beginning of mankind.

Archeological evidence shows that humanity originated from the African continent and that a group of around 2,000 Africans who left the continent thousands of years ago are the ancestors of the rest of humanity.

Everybody, then, is an African in some way or another.

Africa's history is also perhaps the most contentious history, because along with it comes the baggage of racial ideologies that plague our world. On one extreme are those who, in an attempt to show the inferiority of those of African descent, describe Africa as having no history.

For example, Hugh Trevor Roper, who was the Regis Professor of History at Oxford (the Regis Professor is appointed directly by the Queen) in the opening page of his book *The Rise of Christian Europe*, described African history as "the meaningless gyrations of savage tribes in remote but picturesque parts of the globe."

On the other extreme is the Afrocentric approach which ascribes everything great in human civilization as coming from Africa.

Afrocentrists struggle to find evidence of multitudes of great monuments, empires, and civilizations in Africa, and thus they dwell on the few they can find — the pyramids, Great Zimbabwe, the Djenné mosque, the stone churches of Ethiopia — and give them far more importance than they merit. The truth of African history is somewhere in the middle.



•The great pyramids of Egypt ... one of the extant symbols of African history

Africa does not have a lot of history in one sense as there are not nearly as many written and monumental records of Africa's history as there are for other parts of the world. Africa's history has been largely an oral history, a history passed down through generations of storytellers and musicians.

Just like any other continent, however, Africa does have a great and triumphant history of empires, kingdoms, and ancient civilizations, including the ancient history of Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia and the lesser known Nok culture of Nigeria which dates back to 500 BC. Chickens, native to Vietnam, were present in Africa by 800AD, exhibiting long distance trade and interaction.

While Europeans were in the dark ages, Africans in what is now Zimbabwe were trading with China and building great cities of stone which still survive today 800 years later. During the Medieval period, bananas arrived in Africa from Southeast Asia, and tobacco, native to the Americas, was present in parts of Africa before Euro-

pean contact.

In West Africa, there were the three kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, each succeeding and becoming greater than its predecessor. When Columbus stumbled onto the New World, Timbuktu, in Mali, was a renowned center of Islamic learning and the king of Mali was said to be the richest monarch in the world.

When the Portuguese began trading with Benin around the same time, they were careful not to let the rulers of Benin know where Portugal was for fear that the mighty Benin Empire might wish to conquer their country. In short, Africa is not, and has never been, cut off from the rest of the world.

The list can go on, but the truth is that the list remains limited.

Even more so, the list of great monuments to compare to the great cathedrals and castles of Europe, the great mosques of the Islamic world, the great temples of India and East Asia, and the great temples of the Incas and Aztecs, are limited to a handful, the very handful Afrocentrists

dwell on so much.

Does this mean that Hugh Trevor-Roper is correct, that African history does not amount to much? Certainly not. Until recently, Africa was one of the most underpopulated continents, and this was not because of the Atlantic slave trade.

The average African was and still is a farmer, and previously, there was plenty of land available. Anytime a city or a state would become powerful enough to control a vast piece of territory, they would need to establish a system of taxation to enable them to govern.

Overtaxed Africans had it easy. They could vote with their feet and leave the territory, easily finding farmland elsewhere. The relatively 'uncaptured' African peasant was the bane of kingdom and empire builders, and the inability to procure vast amounts of tax revenue and labour made it almost impossible for kingdoms to last long, or to build lasting monuments to their memories. A tourist in Europe or Asia may marvel at all the architectural wonders.

Wiebe
Boer
Perspectives of a Nigerian-American



The greatness of Africa's history, then, is in its simplicity. But this very simplicity is a sign of the complexity and diversity of the African people and their cultures. It is also a sign of the adaptivity and resilience of Africans through the centuries, certainly making the continent's people among the greatest 'managers' in human history.

While Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki were on Roben Island symbolically bringing in what they hope will be "Africa's Century," the average African was celebrating the new millenium fully realizing the difficulties ahead.

But those are not difficulties that cannot be overcome and cannot be survived, because that is what Africans have historically been best at.

Perhaps if African states will finally come to the realization that their greatest asset is the resilience and strength of their people, they will put a stop to nonsense prestige projects designed to show the rest of the world that Africa can build big things too.

Instead, they need to set up infrastructure that will enable the world's greatest 'managers' to bring the continent forward in a meaningful way using their centuries of accumulated wisdom and ingenuity. Prestige projects are simply monuments to Africa's Western submission.

Africa's lack of great monuments, the historical legacies to prestige projects of the past, is, paradoxically, a monument to African ingenuity and resilience as well as to African resistance to that same Western world.

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But, those very wonders are also symbols of massive oppression and over-bearing states that could coerce hundreds of thousands to spend entire lifetimes working on prestige projects.

Africa's lack of such structures is a monument of its own, a monument to the adaptivity and resistance of the historical African. When Europeans colonized the continent, they faced the same problems as did African state builders before them. Their attempts to tax, govern, and make a profit were often thwarted not by massive rebellions, but by every day forms of resistance.

By Africans walking away, planting the wrong crops, filling rubber and cotton quotas with rocks and sand, and simply not cooperating, colonial domination was made impossible and insolvent.

There is less room for such freedom of movement now, but modern African nations still face many of the same problems as they try to build modern states and control and tax their populations.