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Understanding Contemporary Africa

FOURTH EDITION

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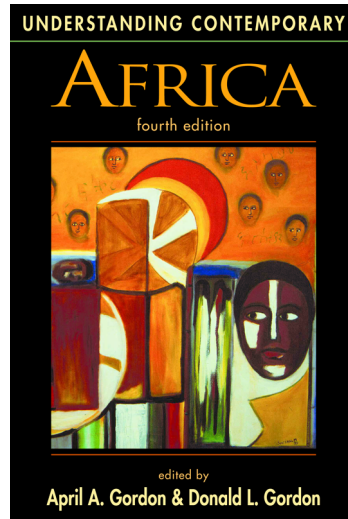
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Introduction

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A frica is constantly in the media at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Almost every day, network and cable news programs feature some event or dilemma somewhere on the continent.

Yet, most Americans know very little about sub-Saharan Africa and its rich mosaic of peoples, cultural traditions, languages, political systems, and economies, or even about the geography of the continent. It is not uncommon to hear a college student refer to the "country of Africa" or for people to think about Africa as inhabited only by "tribes" of "savage" people living in "jungles."

The fact is that what most Americans, even college graduates, think about Africa is almost always only partially correct or based on stereotypes or an inadequate historical or conceptual framework for understanding and interpretation. The media tend to reinforce these misperceptions, especially with their almost exclusive focus on the exotic or on negative news such as drought and famine, civil war, and widespread poverty. While these phenomena certainly exist, there is far more to the continent and its people. Moreover, where Africa is suffering from problems like drought, civil war, and poverty, it is important to know why and what has been or should be done about such tragedies.

Understanding Contemporary Africa has been written to provide the basic concepts, theoretical perspectives, and essential information that are necessary for understanding the dynamic, as well as troubled, region that is Africa today. This book is mainly about sub-Saharan Africa, Africa south of the Sahara. While some mention is made of North Africa, Africa's Asiatic communities, and white settlers (especially in South Africa), those interested in these topics will need to consult additional sources. The authors have

written in depth on the most important issues and institutions in Africa. Although these writers are from different disciplines and each chapter is more or less self-contained, a broad portrait of sub-Saharan Africa is discernible.

Geographically, Africa is a massive continent, roughly three and a half times larger than the United States. Africa's range of climates, topography, and physical beauty have created conditions conducive to the formation of an immense diversity of peoples and cultures. Africa is in fact the "home" of humankind, in which every means of livelihood from gathering and hunting to industrialism can be found. At the same time, the enormity of the continent and its often harsh ecological conditions, such as extremes of oppressive heat, vast deserts, marginal soils, and expanses of subtropical vegetation, left many groups relatively isolated from other parts of the world until the last few centuries and limited the concentrations of population and resources that led to the more technologically complex societies of the "old world" and industrial Europe. Despite this relative isolation, some societies had contact with regions as distant as North Africa, India, and even China. Regardless, all developed intricate cultures with rich religious and artistic traditions and complex social and kinship relations.

As is true of other areas of the world, sub-Saharan Africa's history is fraught with episodes of upheaval, violence, and cultural challenges generated by both internal and external forces. For instance, movements of people within the continent led to cross-cultural exchange of ideas, goods, and people as well as conflict. Foreign religions, mainly Christianity and Islam, were carried in by outsiders and resulted in challenges and conflicts not only with local religious beliefs but with long-established customs and ways of life. At the same time, these religions have been incorporated into African societies, changing both in the process. There have also been periods of peace and prosperity in which Africans could live out their lives in relative security and contentment, partly because most lacked the extreme class stratification and state structures that led to so much oppression and exploitation in so-called civilized areas of the world.

Beginning in the 1500s, Africa's history began to commingle with that of an expansionist West in pursuit of trade, booty, and exotic lands and people to conquer. This eventuated in the most cruel and disruptive period in African history, starting with the slave trade and culminating in colonial domination of the continent. This reached its most extreme form in South Africa, whose African majority was ruled until 1994 by the white descendants of its European colonizers.

Along with its other effects, the Western penetration of Africa exposed Africans to the material riches and culture of the West. As Bohannan and Curtin (1995:15) observe, Africans were not deprived before Western penetration of their societies. Many lived fulfilling lives of great dignity, content

without the "trappings of Western civilization." However, once exposed to the possibilities of Western civilization, the lure has proven to be almost irresistible in Africa and elsewhere.

The influence of the West and Western culture is the major transformative force in Africa today. By responding to the promise of acquiring Western affluence, Africans across the continent, to varying degrees, are being integrated into the worldwide network of trade and productive relationships sometimes called "the global capitalist economy." This global economy is dominated for the most part by the few rich, politically and militarily powerful countries of Europe and by the United States—countries that initially gained much of their preeminence from the exploitation of Africans (and other non-Western people). As slaves or colonial subjects, Africans' labor and resources (usually obtained directly or indirectly by coercion) provided many of the low-cost raw materials for Western factories and affluent consumer lifestyles.

Since colonialism, African cash crops, minerals, and fuels have continued to be transported overseas, while Western manufactured goods, technology, financial capital, and Western lifestyles are imported to Africa. So far, the "integration" of Africa into the global economy has largely gone badly for most countries on the continent as the cost of Western imports compared to the prices of African exports has typically been unfavorable to Africa, leaving almost all countries in debt, their economies a shambles, and living standards spiraling downward. Only a minority of Africans have been able to acquire more than a few tokens of the promised life the West symbolizes.

Another import from the West is Western political systems. Like a hand-me-down suit never fitted to its new wearer, Western multiparty political systems, hastily handed over to Africans experienced mainly in colonial despotism, did not "fit." Most degenerated into one-party states or military dictatorships riddled with corruption and inefficiency. Opposition to the state was either co-opted or ruthlessly repressed. Expected to be the architects of development for their people, African states instead became largely self-serving, bloated bureaucracies alienated from the masses for whom "development" became a more remote prospect as economies began deteriorating from the 1970s on. These legacies have made it difficult for African states to democratize and to be able to benefit from the increasingly globalized world of the twenty-first century.

Making things worse has been the unprecedented growth of population in Africa and the rapid expansion of urban areas. In part, these two related trends both reflect and exacerbate economic and political problems. Certainly, agrarian societies like Africa's value large families. Nonetheless, African family sizes are considerably in excess of those found in most other developing regions. In Africa, inadequate investment in farming,

especially in food crops grown mostly by women, keeps most agriculture highly "labor intensive" (dependent on labor rather than machines). Since mainly it is men who migrate to cities for work, women need children more than ever to help them with farm chores. Moreover, as patronage relationships based on ethnicity and kinship are often vital to gaining access to resources (such as jobs, schooling, or money), children are valuable assets even in affluent urban families. For many Africans, resources are shrinking because of mounting political and economic problems. Structural adjustment programs (SAPs), designed ostensibly to combat these problems, often compounded the hardships instead. The neglect of agriculture and lack of opportunity in rural areas along with the expansion of wage jobs in cities inevitably has attracted job seekers in numbers far greater than the capacity of cities to employ them or adequately service their needs. The resulting discontent of urbanites has frequently been the basis of political opposition to whatever regime is in power and contributed to the problems of political repression and instability.

The way Africans have tried to develop their economies, often on the basis of Western development advice, has indirectly promoted population growth and urbanization by favoring industry, export production, and cities over rural areas. It has also discriminated against women and neglected their interests as producers, mothers, and individuals, with detrimental effects on the economy and social welfare. It has also contributed to environmental degradation, especially soil erosion, deforestation, and desertification. Land scarcity is affecting growing numbers of poor farmers and pastoralists. Lack of resources or technology to improve methods of production, along with lack of opportunity to make a living elsewhere, leaves many people with little recourse other than cultivating or grazing their cattle on fragile or marginal land and destroying trees. Western multinational corporations and development agencies, often in league with African business or state elites, have also been guilty of pursuing economic "growth" and profits at the expense of the environment.

As gloomy as this picture of Africa looks, we must remember that African independence is less than fifty years old for most countries. Africans are a practical and adaptive people, as their history and cultures clearly show. Africans have not been locked in hopelessly outmoded traditions, as stereotypes sometimes suggest. Rather, they have always taken from other traditions and cultures what they perceived to be valuable for their own. African resilience and flexibility are in evidence now as in the past. Africans have been experimenting for well over a thousand years with Islam and Christianity and more recently with secular religions such as socialism, capitalism, and Marxism-Leninism, blending them in often quixotic stews with indigenous African practices. That such experimentation has produced mixed results should be expected. As Goran Hyden

(1983) noted in the title of his book on Africa, there are "no shortcuts to progress," a hard lesson being learned by many Africans whose expectations for quick development have been sharply downscaled as a result of chronic economic and political turmoil.

African cultures remain vibrant and are playing a leading role in the efforts to cope with and address the forces affecting African societies. Questions of personal and collective identity and meaning frequently come to the fore as well as discontent with political oppression, foreign exploitation, and economic inequality and poverty. These concerns are clearly manifested in new forms of religious expression, literature, and political movements for democratization and women's rights. The extended family remains a vital refuge for most Africans during these challenging times, but the spread of the Western nuclear family and other changes in African institutions reflect current adaptations to new realities.

Until recently, it was easy and convenient to blame Africa's problems on the West, and for the most part accurate. The negative legacy of colonialism has been especially profound. Many scholars still contend that the role Africa has been assigned in the global economy as a producer of cheap raw materials continues to prevent it from achieving its economic potential. At least partial blame for Africa's political problems such as coups d'état and authoritarian rule could be laid at the West's doorstep. After all, the West often has had a major role in deciding who came to power or stayed in power. Typically, Western interference in African politics has been determined mostly by geopolitical or economic interests rather than by such lofty goals as democracy or good government. During the Cold War, this was apparent in the support accorded dictators like former president Mobutu Sese Seko (now deceased) of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo as well as Western complicity in maintaining the brutal apartheid system in South Africa.

As the colonial period recedes in time, more critical attention is being focused on Africans themselves, especially their leaders. This represents, for the most part, a growing awareness that Africans are not simply pawns in the machinations of self-interested Western multinational corporations, bankers, or governments. More Africans are acknowledging that they must address their own shortcomings and institute reforms, be they political, economic, social, or religious renewal. By themselves, such reforms are unlikely to overcome all the inequities of the global economic and political order over which Africa has little control; but only an enlightened and competent African leadership can hope to mobilize the energy and commitment of its people for the challenges that lie ahead.

One of the greatest of these challenges is the HIV/AIDS crisis sweeping many countries. Most of the world's victims of this dreadful disease are in Africa, and AIDS continues to spread. Even with a massive commitment

of resources to combat AIDS (which currently does not exist), much of the improvement Africa has experienced economically and in extending the life and well-being of its people will be undermined as AIDS continues to run its relentless course.

As Africa moves through the first decade of the twenty-first century, we must keep some historical perspective to avoid the currently widespread "Afropessimism" about the continent's prospects. We must remember that profound societal transformations are under way and that such changes often entail considerable suffering, alienation, and disruptions that may take decades to resolve. Mao Zedong, the leader of postrevolutionary China, was once asked by author Edgar Snow what he thought was the significance of the French Revolution. Mao's sage reply was, "I think it's a little too early to tell" (in Whitaker, 1988:12). Despite the tragedies and disappointments Africans have experienced since independence, it is certainly "too early to tell" about Africa as well. The story of this immensely rich and diverse continent is still unfolding.

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