

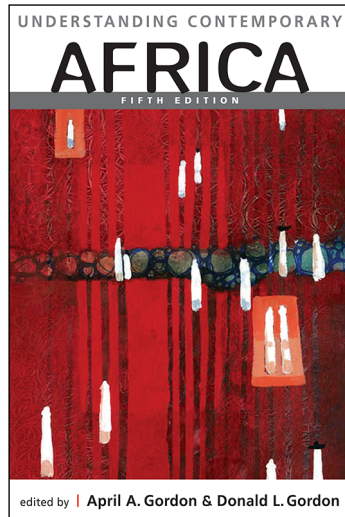
EXCERPTED FROM

# Understanding Contemporary Africa

FIFTH EDITION

edited by  
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and Donald L. Gordon

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# 1

## Introduction

*April A. Gordon and Donald L. Gordon*

Africa is frequently in the media—as print, network, and cable news programs as well as Internet sources—which often feature some event or dilemma somewhere on the continent. As this edition of *Understanding Contemporary Africa* was being completed, the notorious but little-known leader Joseph Kony, who heads the brutal Lord’s Resistance Army, was becoming a household word thanks to a video titled “Kony 2012” that had gone viral on YouTube. A few years before that, the issue to capture the public’s imagination was “blood” or “conflict diamonds,” related to civil wars in such countries as Sierra Leone and Angola. While interest in such happenings is understandable, it illustrates how little most people in the United States know about sub-Saharan Africa rather than how informed they are. After years of teaching undergraduate students about Africa, we continue to find that many of them refer to the “country of Africa” as though it is a homogeneous entity rather than the immense and varied continent of fifty-four countries it actually is. Most students are familiar with only a few of the countries of Africa and have even less familiarity with its rich mosaic of peoples, cultures, languages, political systems, economies, and geography. It is also not uncommon to hear students think about Africa as a place where mainly war and other pathologies exist.

The fact is that what most people in the United States, even college graduates, think about Africa is only partially correct or based on stereotypes and 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 the 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 sub-Saharan Africa. Each writer is an expert in her or his discipline who provides different perspectives as well as a depth of knowledge and experience based on years of research and teaching undergraduate students. Although each chapter is more or less self-contained, so many of the topics are interrelated that they are discussed in more than one chapter of the book. To aid readers, cross-references are made to other chapters where additional information can be found. This helps to integrate the chapters with each other and show the interrelationships that exist between, say, the economy and the political system. Moreover, a common approach is used that provides a precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial developmental perspective for each chapter. The goal is to create a broad portrait of sub-Saharan Africa that reveals how the present can be understood only by including the historical as well as the contemporary context. A discernible portrait of Africa results, as outlined below.

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 has 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 past 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 exchanges 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, plunder, 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, where the 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 Paul Bohannon and Philip 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 in varying degrees irresistible in Africa and elsewhere.

The influence of the West and Western culture remains the major transformative force in Africa today. By responding to the promise of acquiring Western affluence, Africans across the continent 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. Although the dominance of the West is being challenged by the rising economic influence of emerging nations such as China and India, any "Beijing model" of development continues to be eclipsed by the overall influence of the West.

Since colonialism, African cash crops, minerals, and fuels have continued to be transported overseas while foreign manufactured goods, technology, financial capital, and (mainly 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 foreign imports compared to the prices of African exports has often been unfavorable to Africa, leaving almost all countries in debt, most of their people in poverty, and living standards among the lowest in the world. Only a minority of African countries are prospering and relatively few Africans have been able to acquire more than a few tokens of the promised life the developed world symbolizes.

A major 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 with only 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 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 that dominate in most of Africa value large families. Nonetheless, African family sizes, although declining somewhat, are considerably in excess of those found in 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). Because men mainly migrate to cities for work, women need children to help them with farm chores and to provide old age security. 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 attracts 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. Unfortunately for Africa, one repercussion of unsustainable growth policies is global climate change, from which Africa is expected to experience growing and disproportionate negative impacts.

As gloomy as this picture of Africa looks, we must remember that African independence is little more 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 social movements for democratization, economic reform, 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 that is 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 prevents 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 and beginning to 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 that afflicts so many countries. Most of the world's victims of this dreadful disease are in Africa, and AIDS continues to spread despite some progress in slowing the rate of new infections and providing treatment for victims. Even with the recent commitment of more resources to combat AIDS (which is inadequate to the need), much of the improvement Africa has experienced economically in the past few years as well as efforts to extend the life and well-being of its people will be undermined as AIDS continues to run its relentless course.

As Africa moves through the second decade of the twenty-first century, we must keep some historical perspective to avoid the widespread "Afropessimism" about the continent's prospects. Despite the tragedies and disappointments that Africans have experienced since independence, progress has been made as well. Advances include recent improvements (however uneven) in economic growth, education, women's rights, democratization, and addressing violent conflict. We must remember that profound societal transformations are under way and that change often entails 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, which had occurred a century and a half earlier. Mao's sage reply was, "I think it's a little too early to tell" (cited in Whitaker, 1988:12). All in all, it is certainly "too early to tell" about Africa as the story of this immensely rich and diverse continent is still unfolding.

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