

EXCERPTED FROM

# Understanding Contemporary Africa

SIXTH EDITION

edited by  
Peter J. Schraeder

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# 1

## Introducing Africa

*Peter J. Schraeder*

**Africa's initial wave of independence from European colonial rule** took place during the 1950s as marked by the independence of Libya (1951), Morocco (1956), Tunisia (1956), the Sudan (1956), Ghana (1957), and Guinea (1958). Since that time, the African continent has been marked by a series of historic developments. In the early decades, notable turning points included the founding of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963 as the first pan-African organization of African countries to be headquartered on African soil (it is now known as the African Union, or AU); the establishment in 1975 of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as one of six major African groupings designed to promote regional economic cooperation and integration;<sup>1</sup> and the selection in 1986 of Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian writer and political activist, as the first African to win the Nobel Prize for literature, underscoring the growing recognition of African literature within international literary circles.<sup>2</sup> More recently, landmark events have included South Africa's transition to black majority rule in 1994 under one of the globe's most progressive constitutions that "forbids discrimination on the basis of sex, gender or sexual orientation" (Section 9, South African Constitution); the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as Africa's first female African president in 2005, thereby breaking a gender-based, political glass ceiling; and Tunisia's 2011 Dignity Revolution that ushered in democratic rule and sparked other pro-democracy movements, especially in North Africa and the neighboring Middle East.

As we progress through the third decade of the twenty-first century, the primary purpose of *Understanding Contemporary Africa* is to take stock of the socioeconomic and political-military events and challenges that continue to affect and transform the African continent. This chapter is designed

to aid you in that effort by setting out some basic themes that have guided the contributors to this volume. It also includes a summary of the chapters that follow.

## Understanding Contemporary Africa

### *Kaleidoscope of Diversity*

Several themes are important to consider as we seek to understand contemporary Africa. The first is that the African continent constitutes a kaleidoscope of diversity. At the most basic level, Africa is comprised of fifty-four sovereign countries, with South Sudan emerging in 2011 as the most recent African country to gain independence (see Map 1.1). Africa's countries range in size from the small island state of Seychelles (Africa's smallest country at 174 square miles/451 square kilometers) to the medium-sized Côte d'Ivoire (Africa's twenty-eighth largest country at 124,503 square miles/322,460 square kilometers) and the geographical giant of Algeria (Africa's largest country at 905,355 square miles/2,381,741 square kilometers). To put these sizes into context: whereas the Seychelles is 43 percent *smaller* than New York City, and Côte d'Ivoire is approximately the size of the state of New Mexico, Algeria is approximately one-third the size of the continental United States. The African continent is also home to a kaleidoscope of political beliefs and orientations. African leaders have pledged their loyalties at various times and in various degrees to the global ideologies of capitalism, fascism, Islamic revivalism, Maoism, Marxism, and socialism. They subsequently have employed these beliefs to create an array of political systems, including civilian and military dictatorships; monarchies and Islamic republics; liberal and illiberal democracies; and presidential, semi-presidential, and parliamentary regimes.

The socioeconomic kaleidoscope of the African continent is equally diverse. The population size of African countries ranges from approximately 96,000 inhabitants in the Seychelles (Africa's least populous country) to nearly 191 million citizens in Nigeria (Africa's most populous country). The literacy rates of these populations range from a high of 94 percent in South Africa to a low of 15 percent in Niger. In terms of ethnic diversity, at one extreme there exist relatively homogeneous countries such as Botswana, whose Setswana people are nonetheless divided among several clan families. At the other extreme are countries such as Nigeria, which is home to nearly 250 ethnic groups. In terms of economics, oil-rich Equatorial Guinea boasts an annual gross national income (GNI) per capita of over \$7,060 while economically impoverished Burundi struggles with an annual GNI per capita of less than \$290. The range of trade indicators is particularly acute. When one combines an African country's imports and

Map 1.1 Contemporary Africa



*Credit: Peter J. Schraeder*

exports as a percentage of the African continent's total trade output, South Africa emerges as an economic powerhouse with over \$29 billion in imports/exports (19 percent of the African total). In contrast, São Tomé and Príncipe enjoys the lowest amount of roughly \$13 million, or less than 1 percent of the African total. An appendix titled Basic Political Data at the end of this book provides additional socioeconomic and political data for all fifty-four African countries.

### *Continental Perspective*

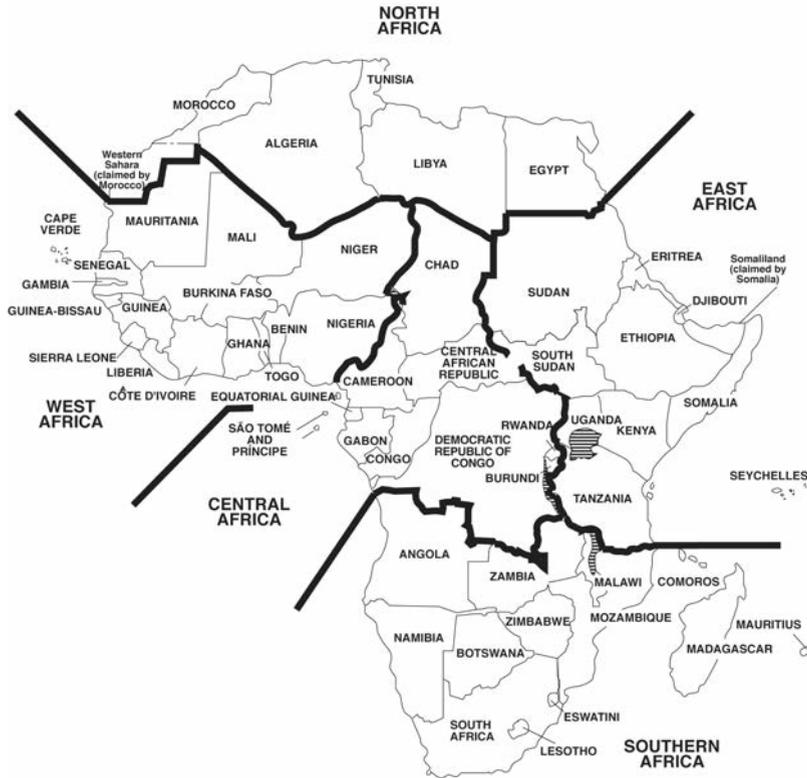
Africa's diversity does not mean that we as observers are unable to uncover and discuss general trends applicable to the entire African continent. Indeed, each of the contributing authors to this book has attempted



*Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is the first elected female head of state in Africa, serving from 2006 to 2018.*

to explain general trends while at the same time being mindful of elements unique to a specific African region or country. Toward this end, a second theme of this book is that a comprehensive understanding of contemporary Africa requires a continental perspective inclusive of all five regions of the African continent. Specifically, one must focus on both North Africa, often referred to as Saharan Africa, as well as the four regions of Central, East, Southern, and West Africa, typically referred to as sub-Saharan Africa (see Map 1.2). Traditional studies of the African continent often focus exclusively on sub-Saharan Africa. This is due to the argument that several dimensions of contemporary North Africa, such as the greater influence of Arab culture and Islam, combine to make that region unique and, therefore, noncomparable to neighboring regions in the south. Although we recognize that specific geographical regions, countries, and even regions within countries may embody varying degrees of uniqueness, this book nonetheless seeks to examine the continental trends that transcend individual regions and thus provide us with a comprehensive understanding of contemporary Africa.

Map 1.2 Regions of Contemporary Africa



*Credit: Peter J. Schraeder*

Several examples demonstrate the necessity of adopting a continental perspective. From a historical viewpoint, one must focus on both North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa to have a comprehensive understanding of the trans-Saharan trade network (Austen 2010). Second, any comprehensive understanding of the rise of African nationalism and the emergence of the contemporary independence era must begin with that region—North Africa—which was part of the first wave of nationalism and independence during the 1950s. Similarly, if one wishes to understand the rise of Islamist and pan-Islamist movements, one must have a firm understanding of the predominantly Muslim countries throughout North, East, Central, and West Africa. In short, a comprehensive understanding of contemporary

Africa requires the bridging of the gap that historically has separated studies of Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, our use in this book of the term “Africa” refers to all fifty-four countries in all five regions of the African continent.

### *Interdisciplinary Lens*

A third theme of this book is the importance of studying contemporary Africa through an interdisciplinary lens (Bates, Mudimbe, and O’Barr 1993; P. Robinson 2004). According to this perspective, those seeking to understand any region of the world, whether Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, or North America, must by necessity draw on a variety of academic disciplines. I vividly remember advice given to me by one of my mentors, Mark Delancey, when I was taking my first graduate class in African politics. He said that being an “Africanist” (i.e., an individual who specializes in Africa) meant a lifelong commitment to understanding Africa in all of its various dimensions, which to him meant different disciplinary approaches to Africa. In order to be a great political scientist who is also an Africanist, for example, one needed to explore not only the politics of Africa (i.e., the discipline of political science) but its histories (discipline of history), cultures (anthropology), and peoples (sociology), to name but three additional disciplinary areas of study. It is for this reason that this book includes contributions from Africanists who hail from a variety of academic departments and disciplines, including anthropology, business, development studies, economics, geography, history, international studies, political science, public policy, religious studies, social justice, sociology, and urban studies. It is our hope and intention that by the time you have completed this book you will have gained an introductory understanding of how various disciplines examine and present the African continent.

The interdisciplinary field of African studies, like its counterparts in other regions of the world, has spawned a large number of academic, professional, and government institutions that subscribe to the interdisciplinary ideal. In the People’s Republic of China (PRC), prominent academic institutions include the School of Asian and African Studies at both Beijing Foreign Studies University and Shanghai International Studies University. In Germany, the Institute of African Studies at the University of Leipzig is renowned for its work on Africa, as are similar German institutes at the University of Bayreuth and Humboldt University. In Russia, a leading institution is the Institute of Asian and African Studies at Moscow State University. Not surprisingly, the African continent is home to several university-based African studies centers, such as the Kwame Nkrumah Center for African Studies at the University of Ghana (Legon campus), the Centre for African Studies at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, the Insti-

tute of Africa and Diaspora Studies at the University of Lagos (Nigeria), and the University of Addis Ababa in Ethiopia.

The United States has a large network of academic institutions that promote the interdisciplinary study of Africa. The largest of these include the African Studies National Resource Centers (NRCs) at US universities that are funded with Title VI funding from the US Department of Education. For the 2019–2021 funding cycle, ten universities were NRC recipients: Boston University, Harvard University, Howard University, Indiana University, Michigan State University, University of California at Berkeley, University of Florida, University of Kansas, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and University of Wisconsin at Madison. These institutions are but the tip of the iceberg of a large network of African studies degree programs and departments that exist throughout the United States, such as the African studies minor at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota; the Alliance for Education, Science, Engineering, and Design with Africa at Pennsylvania State University; the Center for African and African American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin; and the Institute for African-American and African Studies at the University of Virginia.



Sinda Redissi

*“Game Over” was one of the iconic themes of protesters who successfully overthrew the Tunisian dictatorship of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011.*

Moreover, almost all universities, colleges, and community colleges have at least one course and typically many more that focus on various aspects of contemporary Africa. It is highly likely that you are enrolled in one of these classes if you are reading this introductory chapter.

The most prominent US-based professional organization that promotes the interdisciplinary study of Africa is the African Studies Association (ASA). Originally founded in 1957 by thirty-five Africanists, the ASA is the leading US professional association for scholars and practitioners interested in promoting and sharing knowledge related to Africa. The ASA publishes one of the leading interdisciplinary African Studies journals, the *African Studies Review*, as well as another disciplinary journal, *History in Africa*. It also sponsors an annual academic meeting that is typically attended by more than 2,000 participants. The interdisciplinary nature of this conference is demonstrated by the more than twenty panel themes under which papers may fall, ranging from the classic categories of Anthropology, Education, History, Literature, and Philosophy, to more specialized categories of Extractive Industries, Health and Healing, Popular Culture and Media, Refugees and Borders, and Women, Gender, and Sexualities. Other prominent Africa-related professional associations across the globe include the African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific, the Canadian Association of African Studies, the Nordic Association of African Studies, the Royal African Society and the African Studies Association of the United Kingdom, and the Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies (AEGIS).

Governments also subscribe to the interdisciplinary ideal. The various government agencies and bureaucracies that are tasked with foreign policy typically maintain both thematically oriented offices (e.g., counterterrorism) and regional offices that focus on geographical areas of the world (e.g., Africa). In the United States, all three of the national security bureaucracies that principally deal with US foreign relations—the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the Department of Defense (Pentagon)—maintain extensive Africa-related bureaus. The State Department has maintained a Bureau of African Affairs since 1957 that largely focuses on sub-Saharan Africa; North Africa falls under the responsibility of the Bureau for Near Eastern Affairs (Anyaso 2011). The CIA's Directorate of Intelligence, which is tasked with providing the president with the most up-to-date analysis of a given topic or region, combines sub-Saharan Africa within a broader Bureau of Asian, Pacific, Latin American, and African Analysis, with North Africa falling under the responsibility of the Bureau of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Only the Pentagon places the vast majority of the African continent, including North Africa, under one unified administrative structure: the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), which is headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany. The one

exception is Egypt, which falls under the responsibility of the US Central Command (CENTCOM). Regardless of how governments and their bureaucracies divide responsibilities for Africa, the common guiding principle is the importance of training area specialists who have broad knowledge that transcends individual disciplines.

### *Historical Periods*

Finally, a note is in order regarding terminology related to different eras of African history. For the purposes of this volume, African history is divided into three broad historical periods. The first is the precolonial independence era (prior to 1884), which captures the rise and fall of hundreds of independent African political systems. This is followed by the era of colonial rule (1884–1951), in which the vast majority of previously independent African political systems were replaced by colonial states controlled by Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom. The Berlin Conference of 1884, a gathering composed principally of the European great powers that consecrated the creation of formal empires in Africa, marks the beginning of this period. The third and most recent period, the contemporary independence era (1951–present), marks the end of colonialism and the beginning of the emergence of the fifty-four countries that currently comprise the African continent. This period began with Libya’s independence in 1951 and continues today.

We have also distinguished between specific periods during the contemporary independence era. For example, the Cold War era (1947–1989) marked a period of intense ideological competition between the United States and the former Soviet Union and their respective allies that played out in all regions of the world, including the African continent. The post–Cold War era (1989–present) began with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the breakup of the former Soviet Union into fifteen independent republics, with Russia as the largest successor country. This era has also been referred to as Africa’s “second independence,” Africa’s “second liberation,” or as the “African wave of democratization,” due to the process of democratization that began in 1989 and has affected the entire continent. In Africa, this era also has been referred to as the “African renaissance” (rebirth), as witnessed by the construction of the Monument to the African Renaissance in Dakar, Senegal, that is pictured in this chapter.

### **Chapters That Follow**

The remainder of this book is divided into thirteen chapters. The first two chapters are designed to provide important background material. Chapter 2 by Jeffrey W. Neff and Adam Hii provides a geographic preface, including perceptions of African geography throughout history, the diversity of



Peter J. Schraeder

*Monument to the African Renaissance, located in Dakar, Senegal.*

Africa's natural regions, and contemporary geographic challenges. Chapter 3 by Thomas O'Toole and Kirstie Lynn Dobbs provides the historical backdrop of contemporary Africa. They set out the "peopling of Africa" (including Africa's role as the "cradle of humankind"); the rise and fall of centralized and stateless polities throughout African history; the era of trade, exploration, and conquest; and the imposition of colonial rule.

Chapters 4–6 set out the basic political, economic, and international dimensions of contemporary Africa. In Chapter 4, Peter J. Schraeder examines the evolution of African politics. Among the topics discussed are the impacts of colonialism, the rise of nationalism and emergence of the contemporary independence era, the centralization of power and personal rule associated with African dictatorships, the emergence of single-party political systems and rise of military coups d'état and military governance, the African wave of democratization and various types of political transitions it

has spawned, and an assessment of African politics and especially Africa's democratic experiments during the last three decades. Michael Kevane in Chapter 5 focuses on African economies and development. After setting out what economic development means for a typical African citizen, he explores the realities of African development as of 2020 and the prospects and threats to accelerated development, including civil conflict, pandemics, and climate change. In Chapter 6, Peter J. Schraeder explores the evolution of African international relations. He especially focuses on the formulation and implementation of African foreign policy, pan-Africanism and the AU, regional economic cooperation and integration, and the evolving roles of foreign powers, the United Nations, and international financial institutions in African international relations.

The next three chapters (7–9) explore challenges confronted by African citizens and policymakers. In Chapter 7, Jeffrey W. Paller explores population and urbanization. After first setting out the “contentious politics” of African urbanization, he discusses the historical legacies of urban settlement and belonging, global goals and tensions in Africa's megacities, and institutions and development in Africa's secondary cities. Amy S. Patterson in Chapter 8 focuses on public health challenges in Africa. Among the themes discussed are the roles of multiple actors and competing approaches to health governance, the impacts of communicable diseases (such as HIV/AIDS and the Ebola virus) and noncommunicable diseases (e.g., schistosomiasis and mental health disorders) on African society, and the “political prioritization” of health (i.e., when and how does health care become a priority?). In Chapter 9, Garth A. Myers discusses Africa's environmental challenges. He first sets out the political ecology perspective that forms the basis of his chapter (i.e., one cannot see environmental challenges strictly as natural phenomena). He subsequently explores six environmental challenges: impacts of global climate change; environmental challenges of economic development; African parks and wildlife; population, health, and the environment; piracy and the environment; and urban environmental challenges in Africa.

Chapters 10–13 focus on various aspects of Africa's social environments. In Chapter 10, Barbara G. Hoffman explores the relationship between family and kinship in African societies. After first setting out types and terms related to kinship, she describes the relationship between family and social organization as well as between globalization and urbanization. Gretchen Bauer in Chapter 11 explores the evolving roles of African women from the precolonial and colonial eras through the contemporary independence era. She specifically focuses on women in political transitions, women's political leadership in Africa today, and African feminism. In Chapter 12, Marc Epprecht, S. N. Nyeck, and S. M. Rodriguez examine lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) rights in Africa. They do so by

setting out the historical and cultural context of LGBTIQ rights as well as homophobia and resistance to those rights as demonstrated by the case study of Uganda from 1999 to the present. Finally, Ambrose Moyo and Peter J. Schraeder in Chapter 13 explore the role of religion in Africa. This is accomplished by discussing the nature and trends associated with the three broad religious traditions in Africa: African traditional religions, Christianity, and Islam. This chapter also includes a discussion of the roles of minority religions in Africa, such as Hinduism and Judaism.

Chapter 14 sets out several points of reflection regarding future trends and prospects. These are intended as food for thought as you continue with your exploration of contemporary Africa.

## **Notes**

1. The other five regional integration schemes are the East African Community (EAC); the Southern African Development Community (SADC); the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD); and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU).

2. The other Africans to win the Nobel Prize for Literature include Naguib Mahfouz of Egypt (1988), Nadine Gordimer of South Africa (1991), and John M. Coetzee of South Africa (2003).