



History and Africa /Africa and History

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**Presidential Address
American Historical Association
Washington, DC
8 January 1999**

*(Editor's Note: Joseph Miller's oral presentation appears here; for a much longer, slightly differently focused text with full documentation see Miller, Joseph C., "Presidential Address: History and Africa/Africa and History," **The American Historical Review** (v. 104, no. 1, February 1999), p. 1-32.)*

IT IS MY PRIVILEGE THIS EVENING to address my historian colleagues as an Africanist about what studying Africa has taught me about history. Africa, as you will recall, was the continent that Hegel and the late-nineteenth-century founders of our discipline excluded from the moral, scientific, progressive methodology they defined as a place inhabited by "people without history". Africa, for them, was a place as remote as they could imagine -- affectively, culturally, geographically ... far beyond being out of reach intellectually. For them, it was as distant as their sort of history was for the succeeding generations of students in France's colonies in Africa, who began history lessons taught in the colonial style their by reciting "Our ancestors, the Gauls ...".

In my capacity as your president, I am proud to follow Philip D. Curtin as an Africanist. But Professor Curtin, in his 1983 address, spoke about Africa only incidentally, devoting himself instead to themes of comparative and world history. The years intervening since he spoke have brought Africa solidly within the practice of our profession. It is possible now to reflect on Africa's former exclusion from universal history and to chart some of the intellectual pathways along which he and the founding generation of Africanist scholars all around the world -- not least in Africa, and prominently including Jan Vansina, my other inspiration as a historian at the University of Wisconsin, as well as in other fields of African studies -- how they created a history of people who had had none.

The last twenty-four months have offered me ample opportunity to think about this process in the context of the intellectual ways of the discipline you elected me to represent for this year. And it has struck me that my teachers' and colleagues' experiences in having search for a history in Africa may highlight aspects of the historians art and craft that will be of interest to you, as an epistemology evolving not only in response to the times in which its practitioners have lived and worked but also according to an inherent logic of inquiry.

It will momentarily become clear that I speak of history in a humanistic spirit. History's underlying humanism has become more and more obvious to me as I have matured -- or perhaps merely aged -- in our profession. In speaking personally in this way, I hope that I am not taking excessive advantage of what seems to be a privilege of office that the American Historical Association accords to its presidents on this occasion. It will also, I hope, be obvious that I offer this understanding of mine of how we think historically without intent to excommunicate colleagues who may balance in other ways the complex combinations of personal insight, techniques of inquiry,

narrative art, empirical data, engagement with popular memory, and practical applications through which historians disseminate meanings they discern in evidence from the past.

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My story begins at the end of the nineteenth century against the familiar background of the birth of the modern discipline of history, in transition between theological-philosophical speculation on the human condition and a sometimes comparably absolute faith in the evidence of human progress to be discovered in empirical data. Both tendencies specifically excluded most of Africa from their parallel meta-narrative of human achievement and divine favor that in Christian Europe they celebrated. They did so through the deterministic rationale of race that was utterly pervasive in western culture at the time, with support from climatic and other determinisms, and from presumed geographical isolation from primal centers of ancient Mediterranean civilization at the base of Europe's own historical success. These historians attempted to distinguish their secular and "scientific" inquiries from more doctrinaire tests of validity by inductive strategies focused on the monumental construction, literacy, and militarized political expansiveness taken to constitute human achievement at the end of the nineteenth century. By these high and mighty standards, Africans had only "unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe".

[Quoted phrase was a passing comment by the eminent Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper in 1959 that inspired -- perhaps I should say "outraged" -- the founding generations of Africanists to prove him wrong. Now, having done so, as historians, we recognize that Trevor-Roper was speaking deliberately and carefully of "history" in a moral sense limited to an ethos of his own time and place, one that illustrated the closed idealism, and the implicit racism, of the originating philosophy of our discipline.]

In fact, of course, historical consciousness in Africa is quite literally as old as time, even if in Europe and the Americas awareness of Africa's past dawned only rather more recently. In the United States, African history has roots deeper than the mid-twentieth-century process I will discuss somewhat greater detail tonight. African-Americans attended to the pasts of their African ancestors in the late nineteenth century, against the deep currents of racialized skepticism running in mainstream popular and academic cultures. At the same time in Africa, the first generation of mission-educated Africans immediately set about integrating their own local heritages into the mixture of theological and document-based "scientific" history they were learning.

As Africans themselves and their African-American descendants adapted their own stories to meet the high standards of the historical discipline's exclusionary ethos, the key figure in the United States -- to limit a much more complex narrative to terms that I will have time to develop this evening -- was William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. Du Bois, as you will remember, was trained formally in history in the 1880s at Harvard University. There (as he later observed) he found "Africa ... left without culture and without history". He consequently oriented his historical studies to the United States but expanded American history to include his awareness of Africa by writing his dissertation on the "suppression of the African slave-trade to the United States of America (1638-1870)". Du Bois read his first academic paper, on that subject, to the annual meeting of this Association, here in Washington, in 1891.

Slightly more than a decade later, in the midst of a busy campaign of teaching and political activism in the United States, Du Bois published the first continental-scale history of Africa. This African history appeared as the first half of a sweeping, racially unified narrative titled *The Negro*. The book, as its title acknowledged, rested on the racial, and racist, realities of his time, in taking on the challenge of universal history to demonstrate the presence and contributions of "the Negro" race in and to it. For Du Bois, ancient Africa had been the place where "Negroes" achieved in the same monumental, political, military, even literate modes of accomplishment as modern Europeans. But the subsequent intrusion of the European slave traders whom Du Bois he had studied in his dissertation had stopped their early progress. They, and Muslim counterparts, had left Africans in the degraded conditions they suffered in Du Bois' own time. Du Bois phrased this sad assessment of recent African historical experience in the progressive language of the discipline in which he wrote, as "the stagnation of culture in that land since 1600!"

Without personal experience in Africa, not even Du Bois could escape the pervasive European and American judgment of contemporary Africans as backward. But his retrogressive meta- narrative of damage and decline nonetheless escaped from racial determinism, by explaining black people's marginality to nineteenth-century European "progress" by employing what strike me as three key components of historical reasoning: human agents, motivated by immediate contexts of time and place, and acting with meaningful consequences, changed lives and changed contexts.

In relation to how we think about Africa's past at the end of the twentieth century, the conclusions Du Bois drew from these strategies corresponded to history primarily in that they contemplated times past. They lacked African contexts of time and place that were independent of presentistic projections of European values. In *The Negro* Du Bois could attribute initiative only to outsiders, the destructive European (and Muslim) slavers, and he thus left Africans in roles perilously close to those of passive victims, without effective agency of their own. He accepted a timeless, singularized "African culture", as the rubric of racism homogenized the extremely diverse contexts in which Africans had in fact lived through time and over space. Without historical, African context to stimulate Africans' motives and actions, even Du Bois' prodigious reading in published writings about the continent left the of political triumph he noted in the "empires" of medieval Africa -- Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, all cut down at the threshold of modernity -- not a tragedy but rather a story of failure.

(My respect for the time available to me tonight forces me to jump ahead over two generations of dedicated aspirant historians, mostly in Africa and in the segregated "Negro" institutions of higher education in the United States, to the liberalizing intellectual currents swept Europe and the United States during the waning years of colonial rule after World War II.) African teachers and scholars, and Europeans and Americans who worked in Africa with them, began then to add empirical evidence, focused on issues arising from circumstances particular to Africa to Du Bois' inspired, but not fully historicized, narrative. They and their successors -- whom I again cannot acknowledge by name, as I would like -- thus led very gradually and obliquely the study of Africa's past from its anti-racist predecessor approximations of history to processes of inquiry that became epistemologically historical. In the 1950s, these teachers in Africa (particularly in British colonies) were intent on training youths for future civic responsibility in colonies then being prepared for political independence as modern nation states. To give these students a history that would empower people still subtly dismissed as "black", these historical pioneers adapted the neo- progressive assumptions of European political science at the time to African purposes, demonstrating nation-like bureaucratic centralization of power and expansion in political scale throughout Africans' past. A historical record of such accomplishment in the modern European style of governing would justify the national independence that Africans sought. The "power of history", as Joyce Appleby so appreciated what we do as historians last year on this same evening, was as evident in this nationalist generation of African politician-historians as it had been a half century before in the works of Du Bois.

The obstacles that this post-war generation of Africa's would-be historians faced had become more technical and academic than racist. By adhering to the strictly to history's methodological standards, even though the discipline systematically employed them to exclude the people they studied, they saw an opportunity to endow the continent's people with a disciplined, academically respectable past. I want now to follow the historical logic of how they did it, and then to contemplate the logic of history that they helped to reveal as they did so.

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The irony of this founding generation's historical efforts, in a discipline still then defined almost exclusively by methods of documentary criticism, and thus by sources recognized by their literate form, was that writings about Africa were largely those of Europeans. They were the perceptions of naive outsiders. Further, the documents for Africa were still often more than tinged by racist agendas. Modern Europeans' writings were also compromised by uses being made of them in the existing fields of colonial and imperial history to lionize Europe's civilizing mission around the globe. Documents of any sort thus seemed inherently suspect, and even these by European standards were rare for the greatest part of Africa's past.

Africa's past was therefore "un-documented" at history, and the alternative avenues of access to it ran through dense thickets of methodologically uncharted bush. The evidence available down such winding trails was all characterized negatively as "unwritten", that is: by its failure to qualify by conventional standards of literate form

as "historical". But historians in the 1960s took up four primary "non-historical" forms of information about Africa and embraced the non-historical disciplines that produced them-- "oral traditions", linguistics, archaeology, and ethnography.

Beneath the many technical issues and substantive debates along the course of this historical safari lay a constant struggle to convert these alien disciplines to their own historical purposes, that is, to qualify archaeology, linguistics, anthropology, and oral narratives as proxies for the dated documents of the established discipline. Jan Vansina's 1959 manifesto on behalf of *Oral Tradition* (English translation 1961) epitomized this widely felt and professionally responsible quest. Vansina's book made a rigorous and erudite argument for text-like properties of "testimonies" transmitted orally, intending thus to render them reliable as evidence by the methodologies of documentary criticism familiar to the guardians of historical principle. With Africans' orally transmitted memories of their own past, often focused on kings and kingdoms, thus validated as historical, historians a path opened on to political achievement in vast, otherwise "un-documented" areas and epochs in the continent's past.

Material remains of even greater antiquity and more reliably enduring form, when unearthed by the methods of archaeology, bore witness of ancient Africans' contacts with other parts of the world and of their technological proficiency. Evidence of early iron-smelting, in particular, promised Africans a presence in universal history by the industrial standards held to have constituted progress elsewhere in the world. Linguistic methods based on written texts in Indo-European and other literate traditions had suggested broad patterns of how languages change over time, and Africanists extended these models into the rich -- though unwritten -- linguistic environment of Africa's 1500 different languages. By equating languages with people, they could suggest where the ancestors of groups of like-minded Africans might have originated and could infer something about skills that might have enabled them to claim the areas where they had settled. Ethnography revealed functional logics in African beliefs and practices otherwise unintelligible to the modern European eye. Such respectable rationality rescued people from suspicion of living in a historical hinterland of primitive innocence, if no longer in an outback of unredeemable savagery. The functional integrity of the structures that ethnography thus revealed also gave them an aura of enduring stability, which -- exercised with appropriate caution -- seemed to lead (at least suggestively) from current ethnographic description well back into earlier eras. In a culminating bow to history's established methodology, historians of Africa searched every scrap of information recovered from these other disciplines for possible proxies for the chronological framework necessary needed to integrate what they were discovering into a universal history built around calendrical dates.

Auspicious and methodologically responsible as all these inventive paths into an African past seemed at the time, in retrospect they can be seen also to have substituted misleadingly a- historical static abstractions for the lively, humanistic epistemology of the discipline they sought to emulate: they lacked effective people, the change, and the contexts of past meaning from which thinking in a historical mode proceeds. Oral traditions, read as texts, proved so filled with their performers' presentistic inventions that narratives they attributed to the past contained only very problematic reference to actual circumstances, back then. Analysis of generalized language change missed the much more irregular and complexly patterned inventiveness in speaking habits through which generation after generation of verbally oriented people had created Africa's changing modern linguistic diversity. Archaeological recovery and analysis emphasized monuments and artifacts to the virtual exclusion of the artisans who had created them. And anthropologists recognized that ethnographic description, for all its careful abstraction of African structures reasonable and functional enough to have endured from earlier eras, reflected the minds of modern, outsider observers as much as the thinking of the observed, and the latter more in the present than in the past. Imputed absolute chronologies of all sorts proved only very approximate at best, and rough proxies for calendrical dates for isolated events were of decreasing utility as other kinds of reasoning led to integrated sequences of the many things that people in Africa's past had done. Even rigorous attention to methodological discipline irrelevant to African circumstances did not substitute for history's disciplinary epistemology in Africa.

Paradoxically, the ahistorical characteristics of methods so alien to Africa were also the strengths that made them available for historians to peer -- however dimly -- into the past of "people without history". Most were relatively theorized ways of knowing, which abstracted selected aspects of human situations to generalize from them. The general tendencies in human behavior that they thus identified, projected into the historical void of Africa's past,

gave new meanings to the scattered bits of information from it that the first generation of historians found plausible as evidence. These "models" also guided their research toward otherwise obscure aspects of past African behavior that social science established as universally human. The theorized, ahistorical disciplines thus not only enabled historians to recognize the possible significance of the information they had but also indicated new areas in which they might look for more. In one typical historiographical sequence, Professor Curtin and other economic historians in the 1970s revealed the uniformly maximizing strategies of Africans previously excluded from economic analysis as "non-economic men". Economic and political-economic insights then animated nearly every aspect of inquiry into Africans' histories for more than a decade.

Few historians today would mistake the generalized results of these inquiries for their own particularizing craft. Nor do they any longer have to accept what were in fact productive working hypotheses as substitutes for historical conclusions. Whatever the gains for historians in applying social-science-based generalizations about Africa's past to bring Africans into the human fold from their previous racialized marginality, the risk was that the gains would distract historians from the distinctiveness of the circumstances in which their African subjects had in fact lived, leaving them still without historical context and meaning.

But these ahistorical disciplines in fact suggested possibilities about Africa's past that historians could demonstrate were not inconsistent with the limited direct evidence they had at hand. And the search to confirm expectations also turned up other evidence that was surprising and anomalous. From this historians could sense Africans' distinctive ways of thinking that might have produced it. With growing sensitivity to such meanings for people in Africa, historians could begin to "read" even evidence generated by generalizing disciplines for more historical purposes, that is: as expressions of the intentions of particular people who had created it, arising from historical contexts as its creators had defined them.

Many possibilities considered in this tentative spirit slowly converged on probabilities, and eventually -- over the 1970s and 1980s -- these probabilities cohered as frameworks based on African evidence, not external theory, sturdy enough to independently guide historians toward further productive research. Historians thus converted the ahistorical information of theorized disciplines to their own disciplinary purposes by considering how people, acting efficaciously to change (or preserve) the circumstances in which they lived, might have created the detritus that came to them through time as evidence. In this generation of a historical way of thinking out of a historical preceding paradigms, you will of course recognize the familiar, oblique Kuhnian process at work at the level of non-"scientific" epistemologies of inquiry.

Workably rich, human contexts like these in turn challenged the other disciplines involved to proceed through the broad-ranging historicization that has pervaded the academy in the 1980s and 1990s. Vansina's rewriting of his 1959 treatise on *Oral Tradition* marked how far these tendencies had advanced by 1985: an extended title, as *Oral Tradition as History*, denoted the shift in emphasis away from formal properties of evidence (the "oral tradition") with which historians in Africa justifying their sources to dubious devotees of documents had begun. They had come to understand "traditions" as products of thinking in environments where people preserve important information by formulating it around memorable features to make certain that someone reliably recalls it: that is, the people who created evidence in these ways -- not the oral narratives -- became the focus of attention. The subject had become intellectual history mnemonic environments. By examining how they had thought and composed and spoken historians could discover which elements they drew from earlier times and what such elements might reveal about the past human contexts in which they had originated and through which people had cared to preserve them.

Historians and linguists similarly broke through the surface of abstracted African languages into the specific linguistic innovations by which African communities had constructed their ways of speaking over time in bits and pieces, as they had encountered changing, remarkable circumstances. Word-by-word reconstructions framed past contexts and collective actions directly in the reactions of those who had experienced them. Archaeologists elaborated physical environments and mundane contexts in which the ordinary people who had built grand structures, as well as those who fed the builders, had lived around the monumental splendor that they had their traditionally isolated. Ethnographers recognized a historical rationality in the social institutions and norms that had once seemed so rational in their functional stability, seeing them instead as momentary ideologies and strategies through which differentiated African interests had dealt with the challenges of novel circumstances.

When historians recognized the inventiveness with which Africans had thus adapted the heritages of their pasts to get what they wanted out of the present they dislodged the double keystone in the edifice of colonial-era thinking about Africa's past: timeless "tradition", and the primordial "tribes" of ancient origin and enduring stability thought to have preserved it. By the 1990s, Africans and the communities they imagined and created had joined the rest of the historicized world of contingent and constructed groups of every sort. They acted out of autonomous contexts of motive and meaning and effected changes significantly independent stimulus from outsiders. They had come to life well within the epistemology of history as professionals practice it today.

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As I have also undertaken to suggest this evening, thus bringing Africans within the orbit of historical thinking reminds historians in any field of what is most historical about how we all have come to think,. To begin with a truism, historians must engage their subjects, assuming some commonality, some accessibility. But taken to extremes engagement with self becomes exclusionary of others. The progressive form of the discipline at turn of the century embraced its European inventors' own putative ancestors as subjects so intensively, on grounds of race, that it excluded Africans from the scope of their historical inquiry. As racism ebbed after World War II, inclusive mid-century liberal humanism prompted the search for ways to engage Africans through social science. But its European-based, capitalist, modern generalizations risked swinging the pendulum of engagement too far in the opposite direction. For want of viable African evidence independent of these quasi-historians' own experiences, they risked removing Africans from the particular, distant times and places that history must reconstruct on their own terms. Veering away from immoderation of the side of exclusion, they skirted ahistorical excess on the side of inclusion.

It has always been tempting for historians to err on one or the other of these extremes, because both qualities -- inclusive similarity as well as distanced differentiation -- are present in, even vital to, historical inquiry. All history is ethnic, that is, it is about ourselves: about historians themselves, the subjects with whom historians engage by studying them, and the audiences for whom historians write. But the past is also a foreign land, and our subjects lived in places and times distinct enough from our own, often surprisingly so, to stimulate the historical curiosity that sustains laborious research and excites the intense imaginative effort needed to discern difference between who historians are and the contexts in which the people they study lived, back then. Productive historical inquiry suspends both distance and contiguity, difference as well as similarity, in dynamic dialectical tension, in cognitive stand-offs in which attention to each prevents historians from lurching into one-sided emphasis on either. History is a mode of inquiry in which the experience of the present frames the distinctiveness of lives in the past, and in which it is the recognizable peculiarities of our subjects that make us look again -- with added insight -- at ourselves.

The historian's imagination and empirical evidence play complementing roles in a similar dynamic epistemological balance. The near-absence of evidence with which historians began to examine past in Africa and the subsequent process of having to imagine one through non- historical ways of knowing accents this classic conundrum of our discipline. Partisans of both "scientific" objectivity and of self-absorbed reflexive subjectivity have conducted intense and eloquent debates around this contrast, including predecessors of mine on occasions like the one for which we have gathered here this evening. As with the ahistorical extreme to which the simultaneous presence of distance and intimacy, of differences and similarity, always tempts us, the co-existing presence of both externalities and insight gives genuine support for the absolute positions taken on both sides of this "objectivity question". What history depends on is avoiding too much of either one of two good and necessary things.

In fact, the defining authors of the positions that partisans have sometimes contrasted so starkly phrased the relationship between the two in modulated terms that comprehend this balance of internal intuition and externalities evident in the invention of a historical epistemology for Africa. Peter Novick, in *That Noble Dream* (pp. 27-28) cites (the first honorary foreign member of the American Historical Association) Ranke as balancing evidence with imagination, in writing: "After the labor of criticism, intuition is required". And my Africanist colleague J. D. Y. Peel ("Two Pastors and their Histories: Samuel Johnson and C. C. Reindorf," in Jenkins, ed., *The Recovery of the West African Past*, p. 69) describes Hayden White in *Metahistory (The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth- Century Europe* [Baltimore, 1973]), as holding the comparably balanced position

that "a historian's intention ... must always be prior to his use of the evidence ... [and] may be modified by working on it".

Although I have just read their phrasings to accent the fact that both these eminent thinkers acknowledge both essential elements of history's mode of inquiry, for Ranke it is only "After the labor of criticism, [that] intuition is required", and for White "a historian's intention ...[is] ... prior to his [or her] use of the evidence". However distinct these emphases, they are again both right, since both emphases are present, and since the subtlety of the interaction between them has always seduced some claimants to the mantle of historians into single-sided malpractice of their craft. But the productive interplay of imaginative leaps and unexpected empirical indications from which historians have now made history in so exotic and emotionally-laden a place as Africa's past once was demonstrates for me the dynamic long- run equilibrium between the two, with both alternately, momentarily at the cutting edge, and each one stimulating the other along the way.

One more point only that has emerged out of my own experience of doing African history, among the several others that a longer written version of these remarks will develop in the first issue for this year of the *American Historical Review*, still about how learning to do history in Africa may remind historians of other regional persuasions of what is most historical about what they do. And one that allows me to conclude on an accent that recalls my opening affirmation of the humanistic vision of how we work. The scarcities of conventional evidence from the past, with which historians of Africa have learned to live, quite comfortably, have forced us to reflect carefully on how we reason (however intuitively ...) from what we have at hand in the present to what we think might have happened in the past. Such scarcities are, in good part, self-inflicted, as relative to our imaginations and ambitions as they are to losses to the vicissitudes of time. Historians in other fields strain just as hard at the limits of much more copious information.

The rule for historians is that they must recover and reconcile all the evidence they can imagine as relevant the questions they ask. But even the densest data do not speak for themselves, contrary to positivistic enthusiasms earlier in this century. No isolated fact can have unambiguous meaning. And all that we might ever recover reaches only limited levels of certain by statistical measures. The epistemological reason for so exhaustive a rule of recovery is that historians reach their conclusions by assembling their findings into holistic past human contexts, integral worlds specific to times and places as historical subjects could plausibly have experienced them. It is within these believable contexts that historians reconcile the chaos of evidence at hand -- its contradictions, discrepancies, silences, and falsehoods -- as best they can intuit them. It is the whole of such a reconstructed context that suggests -- may even establish -- the meaning given each bit of the information contributing to it. Historians claim meaning for what they assert out of a contextual coherence that has its primary basis in the intuitive understanding that they share with their subjects and with their audiences, out of their common humanity.

For many reasons, all of them familiar, plausibility in history (and much less likely "proof") does not arise from the experimental method of science, directly from what is observed, independent of, or even prior to, the human insight of the observer. Nor will the rationality of theory reconcile contradictions and ambiguities of human existence that must be sensed and accepted, not deduced and resolved. Historical subjects' actions make sense across the distances of time and place because historians contextualize them in circumstances that they, and their audience, recognize existentially. Compelling history incorporates (or accommodates) all the sources available, but relationships among them, cause and effect, and meaning flow from the integrity of the contexts that the historian creates out of them. History engages its evidence and draws on logic, but it thrives on its humanism.

My emphasis on context as history's fundamental humanistic epistemological strategy leads to a further extension of what historians learned from their engagement with alien academic epistemologies in Africa. Africanist historians' involvement with anthropology, linguistics, and so many other, primarily theorized disciplines was so intense in the 1970s that my sharp- witted and witty anthropological colleague Wyatt MacGaffey once characterized the way we ran our field as "the decathlon of social science". We approached these other ways of knowing to find new methodologies potentially useful in an undocumented past, and we dreamed of creating such synthetic methodological possibilities as "historical anthropology" or "anthropological history" to do so. But what we gained from them in fact did not appear on the plane of method where we looked for it. Rather, Africanists of all academic persuasions in the end preserved their disciplinary composites, each

distinct from the others, and historians applied independent insights from all of them simultaneously and pragmatically to the complex historical contexts they imagined. Juxtaposed historically through intuitive application to human dilemmas, the inherent differences among academic ways of knowing enriched the productivity of all. The dialectical balance among them thus achieved paralleled history's other mutual testings of scholar and subject, of intuition and induction.

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In my confidence that lessons evident in doing history in Africa matter to historians specialized in fields far removed from it in geography or culture, I am not the first president of this Association to acknowledge -- at least implicitly -- the stimulative opportunity that the American Historical Association distinctively offers us all. Historians have achieved impressively productive diversity as our discipline has matured, and in doing so we have also tended to divide our intellectual energies along the paths of specialization that have led to such productivity, settling comfortably into the supportive environments of the many specialized historical societies to which most of us also contribute. Among these many opportunities, only the AHA provides a forum that cultivates awareness of the full historical context in which everyone whom we study in fact lived. The opportunity we have in the AHA to deepen our understanding by engaging our differences has always been present here, and the AHA has updated its distinctive strength in recent years by undertaking to "globalize regional histories", in the phrase of just one recent initiative, by the inclusive scope of the current *American Historical Review*, and by collaborating in sophisticated historical thinking on global scales, by the broad and comparative structure of our annual meeting programs, and simply by bringing us all together in a single, confined intellectual space. [Looking around the regional fields, the "Atlantic context" and "internationalization" of North American history and the global aspects of modern European history are becoming more apparent every year. It is revealing to Europeanist to consider Christian Europe's position on the periphery of the Islamic world for a full millennium, and the Indo-centric and Afro-Eur-Asian dynamics around the Mediterranean long before the age of Philip V of Spain, all thrive on balancing, without abandoning, rhythms inherent in each against pulses of change in the others.] The subjectivity essential to history comes alive in this interplay of juxtaposed externalities; we realize ourselves most fully in close but respectful contact with others unlike "us".

The American Historical Association is the context that keeps newer styles of history from taking older ones for granted, and here is where older ones are exposed to resonances of the new that animate what they have already accomplished. It is the place where I can appreciate the essential contributions of historians who concentrate on elements of our diverse profession less humanistic than the ones I have emphasized tonight. As part of this engagement with others unlike ourselves, Africa offers all historians a rich challenge, not as a place fundamentally opposed to "us", as progressive history once constructed it, but one stimulatingly distinct. Even as all historians gain by including Africa, as we Africanists thrive on being here too.

I have found the privilege of serving the Association this year a deeply rewarding opportunity, in ways that go well beyond the intellectual dynamics on which I have touched tonight. Thank you for your trust this year in welcoming an Africanist as your president and -- this evening -- for your attention to some of what I have gained from studying Africa as a historian.
