

DECONSTRUCTING THE WESTERNIZATION OF AFRICA

PLAYER OR PAWN IN GLOBAL HISTORY?

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Good morning! I am glad to participate in this symposium organized by the Department of Africana Studies at the University at Albany at the time the University is observing Four Hundred Years of Inequity and the Department of Africana Studies celebrating its 50th year.

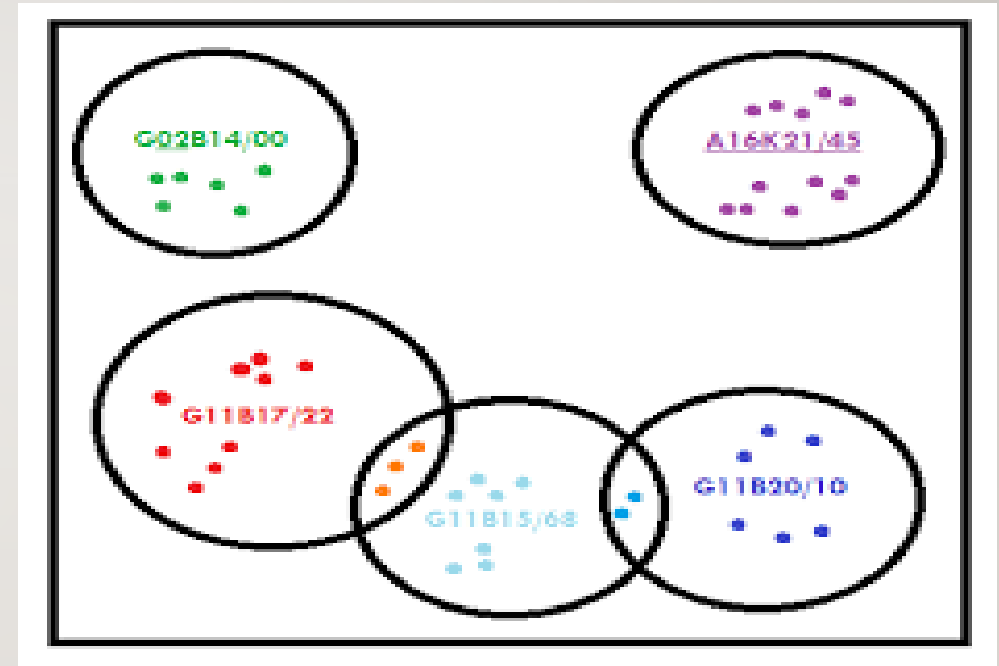
I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Marcia Sutherland, Chair of the Department of Africana Studies, for conceiving and chairing this day-long event. I also want to thank Dr. Oscar Williams, immediate past Chair of the Department, for having kept the tradition alive and my colleagues of Africana Studies for their participation. With Dr. David Agum and Dr. Frank Essien in the panel, we are on a good start for an interesting symposium.



The theory that frames my discussion evolves around the idea of time as explained by Carlo Rivoli in his book *The Order of Time* (2018). Rivoli asserts, with quantum physicists, that time is not linear but granular.



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The author of *Time: The Familiar Stranger*, J. T. Fraser (1987), informs us that “...it is much easier to secure cooperation among people who have no calendars than among people with different calendrical traditions, maintained among other reasons...for the purpose of securing distinct group identities” (p. 315). To control another person’s *time* is not only to control the person’s freedom or labor; it is also to control his/her identity. Westernization came to Africa, not only in the form of control of space but more forcefully in the form of control of time, imposed by force by the colonial administrators and by persuasion by Christian missionaries; thus the seminal book of Giordano Nanni, *The Colonization of Time: Ritual, Routine and Resistance in the British Empire* (2012).



**I WILL TRY TO
DECONSTRUCT THE
WESTERNIZATION OF
AFRICA THROUGH THE
INTERSECTION OF THE
HISTORY OF FOUR ITEMS, IN
OTHER WORDS, OF FOUR
CLUSTERS OF TIMES: FAITH,
SUGAR CANE, THE CLOCK
AND HOMO SAPIENS.**



Faith

The Sahara-Sahel was important enough for the Roman Emperor Hadrian (117-138 AD) to build a wall, a linear defensive structure, over 750 km across the Sahel, to control the southern border on the Roman Empire: *Fossatum Africae* (the African Trench) was constructed in the 2nd century AD (probably after the Hadrian's first visit to Africa in 122 AD and before or after his second visit in 128 AD) and abandoned in 430-440 after the invasion of the Roman Empire by the Vandals.

As you see, the idea of a wall in the southern border is not new. And as you will see the fear of Europe being invaded by Africans is not new either. But the wall separating Africa and the West today is not visible (therefore less controversial) as stated by Robert Kaplan in his article "The Coming Anarchy: How scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism, and disease are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet" (*The Atlantic*, February 1994).

There is a history behind this fear. Africans crossed the Strait of Gibraltar in the 8th century (next slides) with the Berber Tuaregs and, again in the 11th century, by another north African Berber-led movement, the Almoravids and ruled in Europe.





Faith (continued)

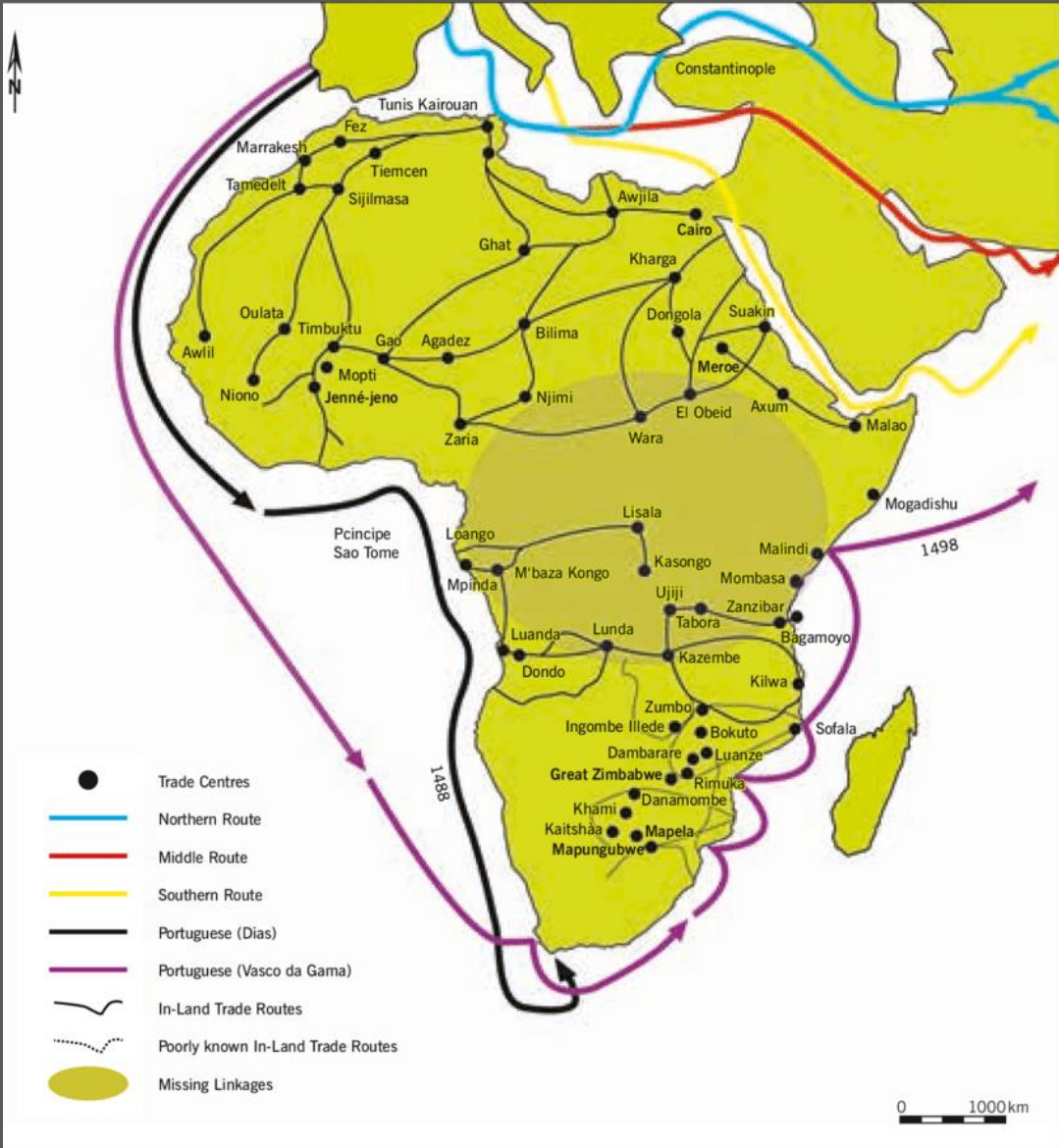
As part of the Islamic expansion, it was mainly the Berber Tuaregs who crossed the Strait of Gibraltar in 711 and occupied southern Spain and Portugal. They called the conquered territory *Al-Andalus* (the land of the Vandals). They ruled in the Iberian Peninsula for 780 years, until the *Reconquista* in 1492. The Moors, as they were called, brought among others urbanization: they developed the cities of Grenada and Cordoba and built the city of Madrid. The new rulers, after the *Reconquista*, wanted to erase any trace of Islamic civilization. They burnt more than 1 million books and sent about 300,000 people back to the North Africa. Vivid testimony of Islamic past in Spain today are the *Alhambra* Palace in Granada and the *Flamenco* musical style. After the *Reconquista*, it was difficult for Europeans to conduct business in and through the Mediterranean. That was when the exploration voyages around Africa began.



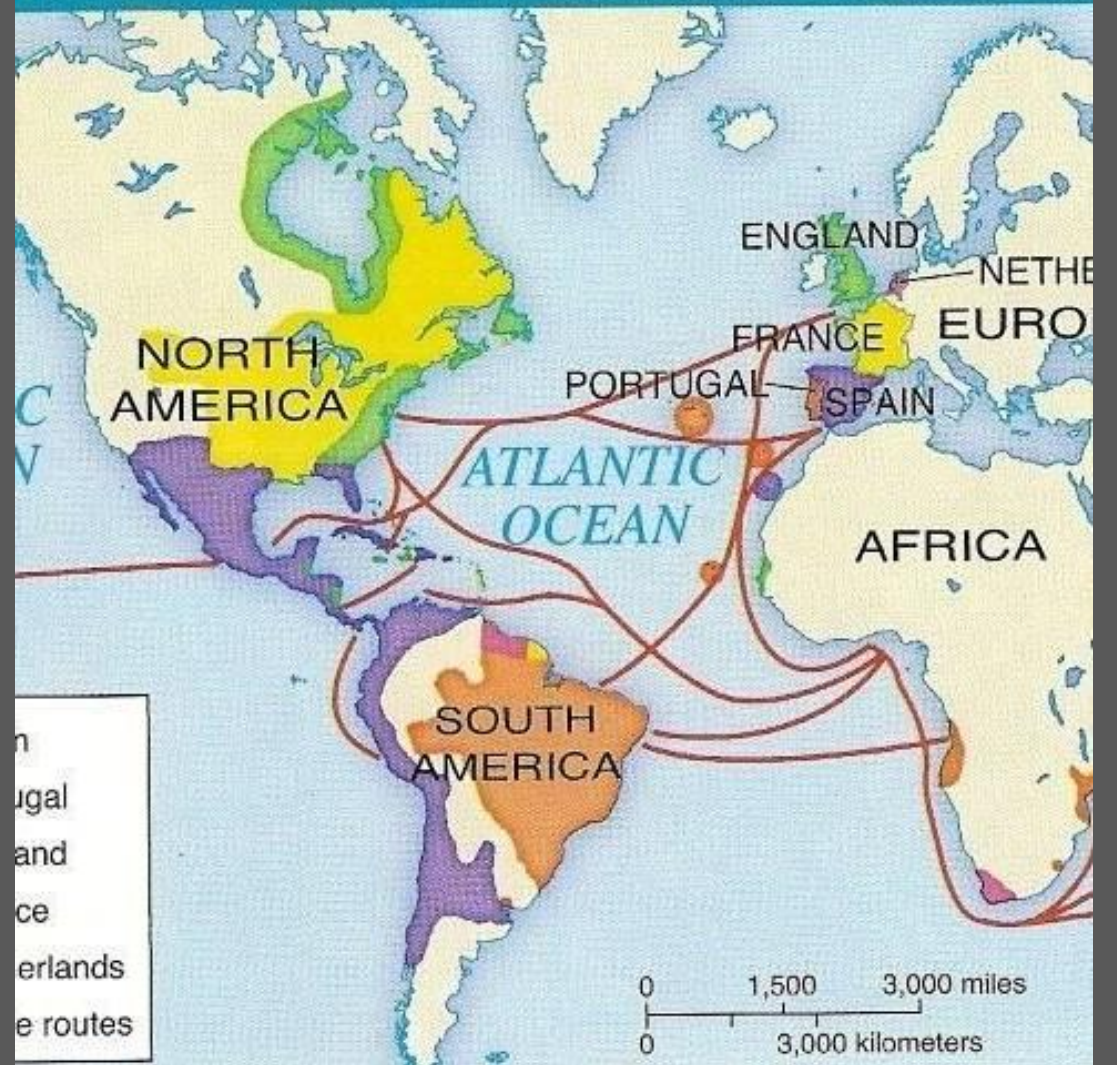
Sugar Cane

It was in New Guinea that sugar cane was first domesticated around 8000 BCE. Then, it spread to South Asia and India and, after Islamic expansion, to the Mideast. It reached Europe around 715 AD and did not get hold until the Crusades when Crusaders got acquainted with the sweet spice. It was an expensive luxury commodity. In London, in 1319, one pound of sugar cost 2 shillings, about \$100 per kg today. Plantations developed in southern Spain and Portugal, then spread to Mediterranean islands, first with slave labor from southern Russia (Slavs) and north Africa to SaoTome and Principe with slave labor from the African mainland.

As Europeans were exploring African coasts, they were also diverting trade from the interior of the continent to the coast. Thus began what was later known as colonial economy: more vertical exchange with the metropolis and less horizontal exchange within and between regions. The two maps that follow show African trade routes before and during European interference in African trade.



European Trade Routes, About 1750



The era in between tells the story of Africa as player rather than a pawn in global history. For example, at the height of the Empire of Mali (c. 1235 to 1670), Mansa Musa was the richest man in history and remains the richest man up today. During his pilgrimage to Mecca, his caravan comprised 60,000 men including a personal retinue of 12,000 slaves clad in brocade and Persian silk; his horse was directly preceded by 500 slaves, each with a gold-adorned staff; a train of 80 camels each carrying 300 pounds of gold. After his trip, the price of gold went down in the region for at least a decade.

He acceded to the throne after his brother Mansa Abubakari II stepped down to prepare for an exploration voyage which he took in 1312. He was reported to have left Gambia with 200 ships filled with men, gold, water and provisions to last for years. He landed in Recife (Brazil) almost 200 years before Christopher Columbus.



Mansa Abubakari Keita II

The Mariner Nautical
Navigator of Mali



Homo Sapiens

When, in 1492, Christopher Columbus revealed to Europeans the existence of a land that Amerigo Vespucci, recognizing that it was not India, later reported as a “New World,” Europeans rushed to colonize it. Then, they needed labor force to exploit it. Through trials and errors, they learned that Africans South of the Sahara were the best qualified for the job for the following reasons:

- They were immune to some tropical diseases and even to some European ones thanks to a long history of contact.
- They were expert in tropical agriculture
- They knew how to do mining
- They were accustomed to living in large communities
- By experience the Portuguese knew how efficient they were in manning plantations as in Soa Tome and Principe
- The Portuguese also knew that there were always some African rulers willing to sell their war captives.

When, in the 19th century, the illicit trade ceased and the licit one began, profit made in slaves trade was used to finance European industrial revolution.



The clock

The United Kingdom, then France, Germany and the United States were producing too many goods for the existing market. Africa was not only a potential market for these goods but also a source of raw materials for European industries.

Protected territories began to emerge and then recognized as colonies after the conference of Berlin in 1884. One should notice that it was also in 1884 that the Greenwich Median Time was declared. Time, in the rest of world, was to be measured according of the geographical position of London.

Two parallel processes were under way. While Europeans were developing their democratic institutions, they were establishing overseas (to borrow a word from FDR) “feudal colonial empires” and autocratic rules. That was not Westernization. And while they were building their industries, they were deindustrializing the rest of the world. That was not modernization. Colonization was a massive, and successful at that, enterprise of deindustrialization of what we know today as the Third World.



The clock (continued)

The clock was the most efficient tool of control: first pushed by monasteries to ensure that daily prayers were performed exactly at set times, it moved quickly from the sacred to the commercial domain. And grouping days in units of seven with a mandatory Sabbath also came with control by the West.

Extracting time from nature and putting it in a machine has helped measure productivity and ensure collective punctuality: a rhythm of life and productivity imposed by the colonial administration by coercion and by the missionaries by persuasion.

The control of time was more efficient in controlling the colonized than the control of space. It made colonization profitable and economically legitimate for citizens in the metropolis.



Conclusion

Without the West, like Japan, China and others, Africa would be less Westernized (or at least in its own terms) but certainly more modernized.

In Africa south of the Saharan, unlike any other part of the world, the colonizer decolonized but never left. Therefore westernization, as can be observed today, is not a free choice.

With the constant presence, and I want to add, constant control of the West (Francophone Africa particularly), Africa is more westernized than modernized.

As Ali Mazrui put it in his video series, *The Africans*, westernization without modernization means western taste without western skills. Therefore, it perpetuates a situation of permanent dependency.



Thank
you

