

Book Review—What is “Africa”?

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John Parker and Richard Rathbone gave a brief introduction of the history of Africa in their short book *African history*,¹ which can be divided into seven parts, namely, “the idea of Africa”, “Africans”, “Africa’s past”, “Africa in the world”, “colonialism in Africa”, “imagining the future of Africa” and “memory of the past of Africa”. In this article I will focus on “the idea of Africa”, especially illustrating the invention, physical reality and diversity of Africa.

INVENTION OF “AFRICA”

John Parker and Richard Rathbone provided a rather big topic, namely, African history, in their short book. Before considering the content of African history, the prerequisite is to define what “African history” is. This causes numerous questions. The core issue is how ‘African’ is understood. Should African history encompass the whole continental landmass, including those regions in both north and south of the Sahara desert and even those people who are not ‘black’? Or does African history contain Sub-Saharan or black Africa? If it is the latter, should it contain the Africans who lived outside the continent, especially those black diaspora who were sold in the slave trade? Many scholars have debated those questions for a long time. For example, *The History of a Continent* written by John Iliffe,² covered the whole continent of Africa, from north to south. while *Africa since 1940*³ written by Frederick Cooper set its scope to the Sub-Saharan regions without mentioning North Africa. Numerous scholars even debated the inclusion of the diaspora. Some of them thought African history should extend to what has been called the ‘black Atlantic.’ Indeed, it is not easy to tell whether these approaches are wrong or right. Even today, those definitions of ‘African history’ are still arousing many arguments among academic scholars.

In the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, because of the influence of pseudo-scientific racial hierarchies and colonial empires, most Europeans thought “Africa, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, had no history to speak of”⁴. They made this statement due to the following three reasons. First, Africa was a backward, even primitive society without a history of

¹ John Parker and Richard Rathbone, *African history* (Cambridge, 2002).

² John Iliffe, *African: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge, 1995).

³ Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940* (Cambridge, 2002).

⁴ Parker and Rathbone, p. 6.

industrious civilization. Second, there were no united language and literature to record African history at that time. Third, in African local societies, there were not many literate people at that time who had historical consciousness to record history. However, this perception that Africa had no history is not well-founded. African people have their understanding of their past and they have their unique way to memorize it. Although primitive society is backward, this does not mean that people who are in such a society do not have their history. Social situation is not the direct cause of the lack of history. Recently, the recognition of African history as a significant academic discipline can be seen as a massive breakthrough in the understanding of the diversity of human history.

Before touching upon the contours of African history, it is necessary to scrutinize that of “Africa” itself. According to Congolese philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe, the author of the book *The Invention of Africa*, the idea of Africa is not created by local Africans but by non-Africans.⁵ There is evidence that can support Mudimbe’s view. The origin of the word can date from traditional civilizations in the ancient Mediterranean. To distinguish the peoples of the Mediterranean coast from the darker-skinned ‘Ethiopians’ in the south, the Greek called those people from its southern shores as ‘Libyans’ which can regard as a racial connotation. After the conquest of Carthage in 146 BC, Roman Empire referred to the African continent as the Afr., which meant “Africa” or the “land of the Afri”⁶. In the 15th century, Portuguese mariners conquered Morocco, using “Africa” to describe the entire continent. Therefore, the word “Africa”, as the name of the African continent, appeared in the European maps and many people were familiar with Africa continent because of the word.

In the 16th and 19th century, transatlantic slave trade changed the Europeans’ mind on such issues as racial inferiority, enslavement, and Africa. Moreover, Africans themselves first began to apply the idea of Africa to strive for their equal rights. The first to do so were Olaudah Equiano and Alexander Crummell who were not only famous anti-slave trade advocates but also Western-educated intellectuals from the black diaspora. Those thinkers established a foundation called Pan-Africanism, using the idea of Africa and European language of race in the 19th century to propagandize that Africa should be seen as “the home of a distinctive people, the ‘Negro race.’”⁷

Europeans were not the only outsiders to ‘discover’ the continent at all. Muslims Arabs conquered the whole of coastal North Africa in 632AD. Indigenous Egyptians and Berber peoples who were previously Christianity before Muslim Arabs’ conquest changed original faiths to Muslim. Berber and Arab traders came across the Sahara to do business including the export of slaves. According to Muslims’ view, it is not the skin color but the “paganism” that

⁵ V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge (African Systems of Thought)* (Indiana, 1988), p. 234. The author is a Congolese philosopher.

⁶ G.Mokhtar, *General history of Africa, II Ancient* (California, 1981), p. 152.

⁷ Parker and Rathbone, p. 18.

became the main reason for enslavement. However, according to the data collected in *General history of Africa, II Ancient*⁸, it can be concluded that the black Africa, from Muslim North Africans' perception, was conceived as a "paradigm of difference"⁹. For those who wanted to define Africa and the black race, North Africa posed a tough problem. In the 19th century, most Pan-Africanists believed that Africans' redemption was tightly connected with Christianity. This view aroused different attitudes toward Islam. In the Pan-Africanists' view, Africa is seen as a part of world history by establishing a link between African culture and the Middle Eastern origins of Christianity.

PHYSICAL REALITY OF AFRICA

The word "Africa" may be invented. But what Africa represents is truly existent. The physical reality of Africa encompasses nature environments and landscapes. Many scholars have been keeping their eyes on environmental history in recent years in that its content is intimately connected with current hot issues, such as global climate change, population growth, and ecological protection and so on. According to John Parker, "our perceptions of the past are determined by the concerns of the present."¹⁰ European perception of Africa in the imperial age was relied on "environmental determinism".¹¹ Most of Europeans believed that racial characteristics were determined by environmental conditions and Africans' backwardness was caused by external environments, such as decaying tropical climate.

African history was much more complex than other continents' history due to its environment. On one hand, the topography of African continent was less extreme than that of other continents. On the other hand, Africa's ecological system changed with the rainfall levels. Some of its ecological zones were not suitable for people who lived there. Because of the high occurrence of disease and extreme climate changes and different terrains, the population growth in Africa was limited. Scattered and mobilized populations caused limitation of building a centralized political power, which can explain why Africa had many tribes rather than those states with centralized power possessed by local authorities¹².

African people took actions to change local landscapes. To begin with, many exotic food crops had been cultivated in the local farming system. Bananas that were originated from southeast of Asia in the first millennium and wheat from northeast of Asia thousands of years ago were planted in Africa since they were transformed into local places. Local environmental change influenced the African people. Take the Sahara desert for example. About 10,000 years ago, tropical Africa's climate was accompanied by high rainfall. Many Africans in Sahara desert

⁸ *General history of Africa*, pp. 245-256.

⁹ Parker and Rathbone, p. 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

made a living by hunting animals, fishing and cultivating grains. The earliest Africa's art and rock paintings occurred during that time. However, about 5,000 years ago, rainfall began to shrink, and Sahara desert became drier than before. The process of desiccation caused huge impact on Africans' settlement. Many locals were forced to leave and searched for new living areas in East Africa and the forest fringes of the west.

DIVERSITY OF AFRICA

According to John Parker's statement, the best way to analyze African was to emphasize African's difference. Four elements can explain why we can use diversity to describe Africans. First, compared with other counties in the world, Africa was a large genes pool because of its substantial geographic feature. Second, many dialects and vulgarisms existed in Africa. According to the data collected by experts, there were at least 1500 regions in Africa and over 300 languages were spoken in Nigeria alone, let alone the whole African continent. Those languages and dialects spoken by African included English, French, Arabic, and Portuguese, and local lingua francas such as Swahili, Hausa, Lingala and so on. Third, religions in African were abundant, including Christianity, Mohammedanism, some local religions and other hybrid religions. Those different faiths exerted profound influence on many living aspects for Africans. For example, some laws exercised by different regions among Africans were based on those religions' principles. Fourth, except those three elements mentioned above, the African had cultivated a multiplicity of cultures, such as ideas, beliefs, and values and so on. Take artistic expression, for example, Africa was full of the magic of music, dance, architecture, clothing, and bodily decoration and so on. In conclusion, diversity created the unique African, which can prove the statement that Africa had its history which can be shown in its features of variety.

On the basis of diversity of Africa, it will be easier to understand the indirect rule imposed by the English colonists. Colonialists cannot exercise their power efficiently in Africa under the condition of diversity of Africa. According to John Parker and Richard Rathbone' statement, Europeans missionaries and colonial administrators in the past intended to collapse multiple identities onto the single concept of 'tribe' to avoid influence exerted by the diversity of Africa¹³. Colonial administrators tended to use the local tribal chiefs to carry out effective controls well under the specific circumstance that many African people refused to endure cruel rules set by colonists and revolted against it. Therefore, the concept of tribe expressed not only a moral idea but also a political tool used by colonial administrators. From the perspective of a moral idea, tribe told people the histories of establishing the communities and states. From the standpoint of a political tool, colonial administrators intended to mobilize the support of regional constituencies by using tribal system.

CONCLUSION

¹³ Ibid., p. 73.

Considering the accessibility of the information of African history, I think that Professor John Parker and Professor Richard Rathbone have actually done a very great work in illustrating and analyzing Africa history. The book has provided a general guideline for those who are not familiar with African history, amply illustrating African history from ideology to physical form, from local to entirety, from the past to the future. It offers a new perspective usually neglected by many historians to study Africa history, using idea of Africa as an entry point to illustrate what African is and what African history is.

However, I would like to point out that it is regretful that the book did not mention other opinions shared by people from developing countries when he was talking about why the statement that Africa has no history is wrong. It is not convincing if the author just mentioned individuals' view from developed countries in that readers cannot clearly know whether Africa has no history was a common view at that time or not. As an ordinary reader, it would be more convincing for me to understand this statement. Moreover, it is a pity that the book did not use diversity of law to explain the differences of colonists' rule. Only the influence of laws is not enough to explain why colonists must use different ways to rule the local areas. Personally I think the author can combine related history and specific change of laws in Africa before and after colonial rule to illustrate their different ruling systems in Africa.