The story is already well told that history as a professional discipline developed out of the rise of the nation-state and nationalism, with an emphasis on methodological rigor that is based on institutional archives. This origin came along, however, with an impoverished diet of methodology that has since conditioned the growth of a stunted historiography, especially with the elision of about 99 percent of human temporal experience from the purview of historical inquiry. Thus the period referred to as prehistory, because of its lack of documentary sources, is considered unfit for historians proper but is deemed the appropriate purview of archaeologists and ethnohistorians. This has been good for building disciplinary boundaries, but not without the consequence of truncating historical consciousness. These temporal barriers, created by nationalism and colonialism, have been a subject of criticism by scholars who are committed to the study of the deep past. It is not surprising that this endeavor was pioneered by scholars interested in the long-term history of recently colonized societies. Hence, in the introduction to Three Thousand Years in Africa: Man and His Environment in the Lake Chad Region of Nigeria (1981), Graham Connah defiantly wrote:

The study of Man’s past should be indivisible and there can be no such thing as an historical time before history: providing that we define history as the whole natural history of Man and not his written history only. Thus to write about Africa’s past it is essential to step over some of the traditional academic boundaries.

The shadowy tail of prehistory indeed tends to be very long in those parts of the world that either experienced European colonialism in the past five hundred years or did not adopt writing as a mode of representation. What is considered historical

I have benefited from the critical reflections of Ray Kea on an earlier draft of this article, and from long conversations with Babatunde Agbaje-Williams, Jonathan Walz, and Lea Koonce Ogundiran. I gratefully acknowledge that much of the research that originally stimulated the ideas expressed here was made possible by a 2004 National Endowment for the Humanities grant (HR-50114-04).


in those places is often reduced to a few centuries. This is true for North America, Africa, and other parts of the Global South. Scholars who are devoted to a deep-time understanding of African history, especially outside the littorals of the Mediterranean and the valley of the Nile, have drastically shortened this shadow as they cast the light of interdisciplinarity on the historicity of the “pre” and its transformative qualities. The range of sources that these studies tend to amass to reconstruct Africa’s deep past—linguistics, comparative ethnography, archaeology, art, oral traditions, and different forms of writing sources—not only illuminate social actions over long periods, but also allow us to understand how much the past is still lived in the present. By de-centering documentary sources in historical writing, these studies have shown that the shadow of prehistory is longer in Africa and other postcolonial societies because of the exclusionary practices of historical methodology, not because of the shallow depths of history in those places.

The major question evoked by the three articles in this forum is how to conceptualize and write history across what is assigned to different temporalities and different horizons of experience that are supposedly opposed to history: prehistory and history, premodern and modern, as well as precolonial and colonial/postcolonial. If we were to defy the professional practices that keep these divides sacrosanct, the contributors are asking, what kinds of history would we write? In answering this question, Daniel Lord Smail and Andrew Shryock destabilize the neat stacks of chronology and temporality that separate premodern from modern; James F. Brooks foregrounds the seventeenth-century Catholic conversion and colonialism in the American Southwest (modernity) in the region’s one thousand years of gendered struggles of religious and political authority (premodern); and Rosalind O’Hanlon’s deep-time approach to the history of western India reveals continuities between what is termed premodern and early modern in that region. The essays raise a number of questions that are at the epistemological core of historical inquiry, most of which resonate with the African historiography of the past hundred years. This commentary therefore serves as an Africanist historian’s conversation with these authors on the problematics of writing history across “deep time” and “vast space,” with an

5 The studies that challenge the prehistory/history divide are based on three primary types of sources: oral traditions/historical ethnography, historical linguistics, and archaeology. But even when scholars privilege one of these as the primary evidential basis, they integrate it with the other two. In historical linguistics, for example, see Christopher Ehret, An African Classical Age: Eastern and Southern Africa in World History, 1000 B.C. to A.D. 400 (Charlottesville, Va., 1998); Kairn A. Klieman, “The Pygmies Were Our Compass”: Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa. Early Times to c. 1900 C.E. (Portsmouth, N.H., 2003); David Lee Schoenbrun, A Green Place, a Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century (Portsmouth, N.H., 1998); Jan Vansina, Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa (Madison, Wis., 1990). For archaeological approaches that are framed in conversation with the historiography, see Gérard L. Choin and Christopher R. DeCorse, “Prelude to the Atlantic Trade: New Perspectives on Southern Ghana’s Pre-Atlantic History (800–1500),” Journal of African History 51, no. 2 (2010): 123–145; Peter R. Schmidt, Historical Archaeology: A Structural Approach in an African Culture (Westport, Conn., 1978); Chapurukha M. Kusimba, The Rise and Fall of Swahili States (Lanham, Md., 1999); Akinwumi O. Ogundiran, Archaeology and History in Ilare District (Central Yorubaland, Nigeria), 1200–1900 A.D. (London, 2002); Ann B. Stahl, Making History in Banda: Anthropological Visions of Africa’s Past (Cambridge, 2001).

6 A point well articulated by Peter R. Schmidt in Historical Archaeology in Africa: Representation, Social Memory, and Oral Traditions (Lanham, Md., 2006).

7 For a fuller account of this development in African historiography, see Joseph C. Miller, “History and Africa/Africa and History,” American Historical Review 104, no. 1 (February 1999): 1–32.
emphasis on the implicated issues of periodization, temporality, scale, historical sources, and comparative history.

The forum contributors seem to have taken to heart an observation made by Frederick Jackson Turner more than a century ago: “to history there are only artificial divisions . . . The roots of the present lie deep in the past”—and thus “There is no break . . . no gap between ancient, medieval and modern history.”8 Turner did not deny that the deep roots of history can be sectioned into meaningful slices of time, but he insisted that each period could be understood only with reference to the preceding epochs, and even those that succeeded it. In other words, what is prehistoric is as arbitrary as what is historical.9 Smail and Shryock (and also Brooks) build on Turner’s meditation on the nature of historical periodization, noting how the dominance of the Rankean approach in the Western historiography has created a “relentless boundary maintenance” between premodern and modern, prehistory and history, philosophy and mythology, and memory and history. The totality of change between these divides is impossible when the goal is to make sense of human experience in all its ramifications.10

History shares with archaeology a primary interest in understanding human and social actions within specific temporal contexts. Hence, periodization, temporality, and practice are central to the process of historical explanation. However, periodization is not just about building chronological sequences. It is about making sense of how a community or a society at a particular time viewed itself and the outside world, how it made sense of its past and present and its interactions with other peoples.11 This in turn raises two vexing questions about the idea of temporality: (1) How are time and events experienced and remembered, and how are they organized by social actors and by the historian? and (2) How is periodization constructed and time measured, and whose and which periodization scheme is to be used for ordering time and change, especially in the contexts of comparative and global history?12

It is important to answer these questions if we are to resolve the conundrum of the artificial boundaries between prehistory and history, but this cannot be done without considering the substance of historical inquiry—the study of practice. Practices—of power, authority, belonging, identity, traditions, institutions, languages, ideas, values, gender, production, exchange, consumption, self-realization, class, aesthetics, materiality, knowledge, and religion, among others—are where the con-

9 The interests of the Journal of World Prehistory, Journal of World History, and Journal of World-Systems Research prove this point. Whereas the first of the trio is an archaeology-based publication covering thematic and regional syntheses derived from archaeology- and paleoanthropology-related research all over the world, the last two privilege the eclecticism of historical studies, including archaeology, to inform comparative and cross-cultural scholarship with global points of view. In terms of temporality, there is significant overlap among the three.
10 And, as Diane Owen Hughes puts it, “change cannot be total . . . if it is to be the spur to narrate.” Hughes, “Introduction,” in Diane Owen Hughes and Thomas R. Trautmann, eds., Time: Histories and Ethnologies (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1995), 1–18, here 5.


sciousness and narratives of continuity, transformation, inevitability, constancy, negotiations, contingent enactment, and intentionality are most obvious. The history of practice unites tradition (structure) and agency (experience, action, and thought), offering a robust framework for contemplating historical processes across different temporalities and geographies.\(^\text{13}\) Owing to the legacies of European colonial historiography, however, historical scholarship has been reluctant to fully engage the questions raised by the study of practice regarding the possibilities of a total history that is inclusive but diverse, and predicated on the synthesis of multiple principles of historical thinking and multiple modes of historical representation.\(^\text{14}\)

The history of practice calls for a polysemic conception of time that unites the cyclical and linear modes of historical thinking, since, according to Jörn Rüsen, “there is no concept of history that does not make use of both of them.”\(^\text{15}\) It also calls for a tripartite view of time: the past, present, and future, so that “the sense of what is historic is visualized not just in terms of a past event but also in terms of an unfolding present . . . that is viewed with future times in mind.”\(^\text{16}\) Yet time is not necessarily cyclical or linear. It can be discontinuous, leaving gaps in its trail, or it can be made up of twists and turns, a point well illustrated in O’Hanlon’s and Brooks’s narratives and excavation of memory, respectively. Whichever is the case, time is ultimately, to paraphrase Martin Heidegger, the horizon for the understanding of existence—individual, society, or community.\(^\text{17}\) The forum essays all follow this cue of temporality in the way they conceptualize history as “a process of tradition building or cultural construction through practice.”\(^\text{18}\) This concern with tradition and practice has been an important part of the Africanist historiography of the “pre,” with its focus on the historical processes that gave birth to societies, an approach that is aptly captured in the title of one of Jan Vansina’s books: \textit{How Societies Are Born}.

\(^\text{13}\) Following the influence of Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, and Clifford Geertz in historical anthropology (see Sherry B. Ortner, “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties,” \textit{Comparative Studies in Society and History} 26, no. 1 [1984]: 126–166), there is currently an active interest in the archaeology of practice in Anglo-American scholarship as a way of bringing archaeology more in tune with the framework of historical explanation; see Timothy R. Pauketat, “Practice and History in Archaeology: An Emerging Paradigm,” \textit{Anthropological Theory} 1, no. 1 (2001): 73–98.

\(^\text{14}\) The persistent ethnocentric universalism of the historiography has pushed scholars of non-Western societies to frequently explore the possibilities of alternative histories outside the canons of Western historical scholarship. See, for example, Peter R. Schmidt and Thomas C. Patterson, eds., \textit{Making Alternative Histories: The Practice of Archaeology and History in Non-Western Settings} (Santa Fe, N.Mex., 1995).


In his study of the history of political traditions in Equatorial and West Central Africa, Vansina sees traditions as “fundamental continuities” that connect the past to the present, and that are set to “shape the futures of those who hold [them].” Yet those traditions are not static; they are processes of change. It is their continuous change and “periodic renewal” that keep them alive. Such changes often occur as a resolution of the tension between two realities: cognitive reality—beliefs and assumptions about the world; and physical reality—the incidental, contingent happenings and events that bring new experiences. The cognitive reality is, however, far from being a coherent system of meanings and signs. Rather, it is multivocal, with different planes of contestations inherent to it, a reminder that the debates between Gananath Obeyesekere and Marshall Sahlins brought to full view.

Interrogating the “pre” in the historiography highlights in sharper relief the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical justifications for the historian to fully harness the strength of history as a discipline of temporality par excellence. Smail and Shryock, in particular, paint in broad strokes the methodological approaches that are necessary to develop what Brooks calls “longitudinal insights” into modern historical questions. But for that to happen, the institutional practice of history would need to deliberately facilitate working and thinking across different methods, sources, and genealogies—of memory, experience, traditions, and historical consciousness—in ways that close the wide gaps in the prehistory/history divide. Numerous Africanist historians, some of whom see themselves as engaging in historical science, have long realized the need to develop an expansive historical methodology. Far more than any other area, historians of Africa have demonstrated the value of a historical methodology that is eclectic and cosmopolitan, in which mythology is not opposed to philosophy, orality is not anathema to critical historical understanding, and biochemistry reinforces rather than impedes humanistic understanding of the past.

The periodic renewal of this multidisciplinary historical methodology has been the staple of African historiography, anticipating many of the epistemological issues raised by Smail and Shryock regarding the question of historical periodization, methodology, the nature of history, and the very meaning of modernity. This expansive methodology may well be the most original contribution of Africa to the field of history. It is what, for example, allows us to encounter the Batwa peoples (so-called Pygmies)

---

19 Vansina, Paths in the Rainforests, 258. Vansina’s “tradition” parallels E. P. Thompson’s lived experience; and the former’s cognitive and physical realities are as much the same as are Thompson’s social consciousness and social being.

20 A point that poststructural and critical anthropological studies as well as the new cultural history have elucidated. Peter Burke, Varieties of Cultural History (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997); Lynn Hunt, ed., The New Cultural History (Berkeley, Calif., 1989); Sherry B. Ortner, ed., The Fate of “Culture”: Geertz and Beyond (Berkeley, Calif., 1999).


22 See William H. Sewell, Jr., Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation (Chicago, 2005).

23 For some of the pioneering studies, see S. O. Biobaku, Sources of Yoruba History (Oxford, 1973); Daniel F. McCall, Africa in Time-Perspective: A Discussion of Historical Reconstruction from Unwritten Sources (Boston, 1964); Creighton Gabel and Norman R. Bennett, Reconstructing African Culture History (Boston, 1967).

of Central Africa as a historical subject in the two-thousand-year history of West-Central Africa rather than as an ethnographic subject of the past two hundred years. It also discloses the various technological innovations that defined early Africa as a site of inventions, from iron technology circa 1000 B.C. to primary glass manufacture in 1000 A.D. And it is this eclectic methodology that we must credit for showing that the Sudanic civilization developed a unique idea of monotheism before 3500 B.C. These few examples show how paying attention to the deep past could save those committed to “modern” history from the anachronistic assumptions that tend to define research questions about the recent past.

History is not determined by the nature of sources, but rather by the nature of the questions asked about the human condition, especially human intentionality and actions, and the consequent ramifications. And temporality and contextuality are most essential to these questions. Hence, Brooks’s essay shows how Catholicism and European colonialism were part of the long-term gendered politico-religious history of the American Southwest, so that the modernity of the encounter with Catholicism became meaningful for the Pueblo nations in the context of their long history rather than only through the prism of their colonial experience. Brooks’s and O’Hanlon’s essays both remind us that every society’s experience shapes how it makes meanings of events, makes those events meaningful in the present, defines temporality, measures time, and generates historical explanation. The unfolding of the canvas of the “pre,” using the eclecticism of historical methodology, enables us to situate different peoples within their own traditions and then to interrogate how “they interpret their own ‘ghosts,’ ” and how they use their answers as a source of knowledge for historical reflections. Only in this way can we begin to appreciate the plurality of consciousness of time as a product of deep genealogies of practice unique to every society and the different social groups within them.

Gender relations is a critical site where the history of practice unfolds in multiple manifestations. Across different societies, gender has been a dominant basis for social, political, and economic organization, but we have also learned how age, class, other forms of identity, wealth, spirituality, and culture mediated gendered relationships and hierarchies. In showing the possibility of writing a long-term gendered history of political and religious processes in the American Southwest from oral traditions, oral history, archaeological sources, and (for the post-1700 period) documentary sources, Brooks’s narrative patchworks give us an insight into the implications of biological sex differences for the political economy of power and sociopolitical organization over a thousand-year period. His essay whets our appetite

25 Klieman, “The Pygmies Were Our Compass.”
27 Christopher Ehret, Sudanic Civilizations (Washington, D.C., 2005), 15.
28 Contrast, for example, the singularity of R. G. Collingwood’s view of history in terms of method and subject in The Idea of History (Oxford, 1946) to Fernand Braudel’s plurality in A History of Civilizations (New York, 1995).
29 Sewell, Logics of History, 11.
for what the history of the long term can unravel about how particular kinds of
gendered hierarchies were formed, contested, dismantled, and intensified over time.
Yet, he cannot escape the feminist critique that the ideas and institutional practices
he presents here regarding sexual difference were seemingly frozen in time, as they
focus on what men have done to women over a thousand years, with very little said
about women’s own agentive actions.32

African studies is replete with some of the most trenchant critiques of the uni-
versal woman-as-victim model of historical explanation, in which modernization or
colonialism is seen as the singular agent of change rescuing women from the timeless
exploitative patriarchy of non-Western societies. Some of these critical works iden-
tify European encounters as the harbinger of a newer instrument of contestation in
age-old gender discourses and actions, an instrument that in many instances intro-
duced patriarchal practices that were foreign to the societies brought under Euro-
pean colonial rule.33 Since most of these studies focus primarily on colonial Africa,
they have privileged the impacts of colonial legal practices and social life on the
transformations of what they perceive to be historically fixed gender ideology, paying
scant attention to the sociology and discourses of gendered difference and the trans-
formations in deep time.34

The very few historical studies on Africa that cut across the premodern and mod-
ern as well as the precolonial and colonial divides have demonstrated interdepen-
dency in the sexual relations of power, especially in situations where such powers are
ascribed to sex identities.35 David Schoenbrun, for example, examined the deep so-
cial history of gendered relations of power and authority in East Africa’s Great Lakes
region between the female leaders of healing/affliction cults and the male-centered
political administration over two millennia.36 This and other long-term studies un-
cover gender relations as contested and unstable fields of social action, mapping how
the ideas and practices of gender in diverse social fields, such as healing, hospitality,
governance, justice, intellectual reflections, craft specialization, agricultural inno-
vations, labor organization, and sociopolitical organization, changed over time. Con-
sistent with Brooks’s analysis, such Africanist works seem to suggest that gender is
an inescapable site of social organization and must therefore be an integral part of
any historical study of practice. Thus it becomes imperative, as Rosemary A. Joyce
has done for the relationship between gender and power in pre-Columbian Meso-
america, to investigate “how and why specific kinds of action came to be represen-
tative of certain kinds of gender,” and to stress the logics of everyday interdepen-
dencies between gendered social actors.37

33 Ifi Amadiume, Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society (London,
1987); Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Dis-
courses (Minneapolis, 1997). See also Andrea Cornwall, ed., Readings in Gender in Africa (Bloomington,
Ind., 2005).
34 For a recent example, see Nwando Achebe, Farmers, Traders, Warriors, and Kings: Female Power
and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900–1960 (Bloomington, Ind., 2005).
35 For examples, see Edna G. Bay, Wives of the Leopard: Gender, Politics, and Culture in the Kingdom
of Dahomey (Charlottesville, Va., 1998); Onaiwu W. Ogbomo, When Men and Women Mattered: A History
of Gender Relations among the Owan of Nigeria (Rochester, N.Y., 1997).
36 Schoenbrun, A Green Place, a Good Place.
37 Rosemary A. Joyce, Gender and Power in Prehispanic Mesoamerica (Austin, Tex., 2000), 10, em-
phasis in the original.
Scale is central to historicizing the “pre” in spatial and temporal terms. From the Annalistes to the world-systemists and the comparativists, the scale of geography (though not necessarily of time) has continued to expand in historical writings in order to capture the interrelationships among civilizations, peoples, and regions from the ancient to the modern. In a different way, though, scale is also relevant to the understanding of practice across multiple temporalities. Outside the epistemology of evolutionary typologies in anthropology, the concept of scale remains poorly theorized in the social sciences despite the frequent use of the term in the study of social organization and social relations. Yet it may be the case that scale has the most important influence on the different planes of temporality that constitute the subject of historical inquiry. Scale is not simply about size, depth of time, or social complexity. It is also about the degree of intensity in the exchange of information, the institutions that moderate the flow of social relations, and the networks for the production and distribution of goods, services, and ideas. Scale changes attitudes, mentalities, worldviews, institutions, and everyday practices. And new forms of material life, interactions, and technology can also change scale toward enlargement, contraction, or implosion, as recent studies have shown in the case of Atlantic West Africa.

It is here that the issues raised by Smail and Shryock are important for exploring the intersections of scale, time, and materiality in the history of practice. Their essay ingeniously explodes the canon of modernity by taking us through the various material practices that have undergirded human experience since our species began to proliferate across the globe some 90,000 years ago. They use the social relations of shell beads to poke fun at the idea of the “modern” in the historiography in order
to invite us to contemplate the role of material life in self-realizations at different times and places. To the contemporary historian, it may seem bewildering that the same human conditions and prerogatives that made the people of the Middle Paleolithic in Eurasia and the Middle Stone Age in Africa encode seashells with social capital also determined the social valuation of West African gold in and beyond the Mediterranean during the first and most of the second millennium A.D., as well as the valuation of the silver and gold of South America during the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Similar processes of social valuation made cowrie shells the currency for converting free men and women in West Africa into slaves in American mines and on agricultural plantations after the fifteenth century. Whether in Paleolithic Eurasia or in Iberia, the Bight of Benin, and South Asia during the Atlantic Age, objects embodied inter-social relations as bearers of memory, genealogies, authority, identities, and power. The most portable, rare, and centrally controlled of these objects of social capital served as a medium of exchange and a token of identity that linked families, individuals, elites, small and large kingdoms, empires, and even continents across far-flung territories.

As repositories of social value, gold, cowries, and silver, among others, complicate the meaning of “money,” since what on the surface appears as economic practice is embedded in the matrices of social relations. For the Atlantic Age Bight of Benin and its hinterlands, it was through the use of cowries as money that the majority of the population participated in some of the fascinating ideas of early modernity and contemplated themselves as part of the larger world. Here was a scene at Oyo-Ile, the capital of the Oyo Empire, in mid-1827: Ebo, the minister for political affairs, took the British explorer Richard Lander to his house and showed him a small room filled with cowries. With pride and boastfulness, Ebo asked his Cornish visitor whether the king of England was as rich as he. Ebo did not find his stockpile of brass, silk, damask, or any other foreign manufacture useful for self and wealth comparison. It was cowries that made him think comparatively of himself in relation to a foreign king. After all, it was through this particular class of imported objects that the rituals and other social relations of self-realization were articulated in most parts of the Bight of Benin and its hinterlands from the seventeenth through most of the nineteenth centuries. (See Figure 1.) As a full-time administrator in the service of the


empire, Ebo would have acquired his wealth primarily from political payments such as tolls, taxes, and other types of levies connected to the market and tributes.

The narrative quilts stitched together by Smail and Shryock about the material practices of behaviorally modern humans are humbling in terms of how much the past looks like the present, not only because the present looks at the past in its own image, but also because the present is fashioned in the image of the past.\textsuperscript{50} Their insights raise far more fundamental questions about what it means to be modern than

\textsuperscript{50} A point eloquently illustrated in Marc Bloch, \textit{The Historian’s Craft: Reflections on the Nature and
some of the recent debates that interrogate only Eurocentric visions of modernity. While I sympathize with Smail and Shryock’s muddling of the “modern” as a temporal and experiential concept, we should not lose sight of the fact that early modernity was a consequence of the first truly global interconnection and therefore must be disassociated from the paleoanthropological usage of the term. In this way we can preserve modernity’s relevance for studying the history of practice and tradition cross-culturally.

Given Africa’s colonial history, the teaching and professional practice of African history is largely bifurcated into the colonial/modern (mid-nineteenth–twentieth centuries) and precolonial/premodern (pre-nineteenth century) temporal planes. This periodization scheme, however, conflates two different kinds of modernity (early modernity and late modernity or modernization), revealing a rather curious forgetfulness that modernity preceded modernization in Africa by about three hundred years. For most parts of Africa, modernity refers to the constellations of social conditions, processes, ideas, and discourses that emanated from the continent’s participation in the seaborne global commerce that linked the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean and to the Pacific from circa 1470 to the mid-nineteenth century. On the other hand, modernization is the sum total of industrialized Europe’s ideas of civilization, reason, and progress during the nineteenth century, and the use of those ideas for creating the normative definitions of freedom, liberal economy, secularization, democratic governance, the nation-state, technology, public space (including public education and public health), consumption, and “the privileging of scientism as the highest form of knowledge.” In western, central, southern, and eastern Africa, there were continuities and discontinuities between the modernity of the era of the Atlantic slave trade and the modernization that followed the establishment of colonial rule over the region in the late nineteenth century.

Modernity has a place in the contemplation of history both as a turning point from and as a “paradoxical continuity” of the historical moments that preceded it in different parts of the world. As a historical moment, it was not a sharp break between

---

51 The same can be said of the Americas and the Indian subcontinent, even if the temporal nomenclatures are different.


53 After all, the British merchants who controlled the largest share of the slave trade in the Bight of Biafra during the eighteenth century not only continued the domination of the region’s external trade in palm oil in the nineteenth century but also wrested political control from the regions’ respective rulers. See G. Ugo Nwokeji, *The Slave Trade and Culture in the Bight of Biafra: An African Society in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, 2010); and Kenneth Onwuka Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria* (Oxford, 1956).

two or more temporal horizons; neither was it opposed to tradition nor did it serve as an equivalent of modernization. It was a multiplex of relationships instigated by European commercial expansion and colonization, but involving the simultaneous participation of all parts of the globe. Modernity was the starting point on the journey toward a truly global history, defined by the constellations of production, consumption, and distribution on a scale that the world had never known. The processes and effects of this scale were felt differently in different parts of the world in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and with far-reaching consequences for the succeeding periods, but this does not mean that multiple modernities existed. There was only one. It was the positional as well as the cultural/institutional character of each region that shaped the various manifestations of the same and overlapping interactive processes. In this regard, early modernity is not about the typology of imagined exceptional Eurocentric practices such as the notions of universalism, humanism, and individualism, but about processes and scales toward global integration, and the consequent transformations in local and regional political economies, cultures, and worldviews.

Thus it is no wonder that efforts to locate the origins of modernity in a particular place or time have repeatedly yielded contentious results. The intersectionality of the various temporal and geographical planes that produced the “early modern” as the starting point of the first truly global economy not only de-centers Europe as the point of origin of modernity but also complicates O’Hanlon’s positioning of India “at the center of the world’s first truly global economy.” After all, western Africa was also “a relevant location in the birth of economic and ideological currents associated with modernity”—to say nothing of the Americas, where Christopher Columbus’s landing has been described as “a missile that launched the Caribbean, its European commanders, and African cargo on the path to modernity on board the plantation enterprise that rose on the site of native ruins.” These geographical parallels further point to the importance of comparative history, not only to disclose the processes and practices of early modernity and its relationship to the preceding periods, but also to escape the limiting visions of regional studies. O’Hanlon is indeed accurate that “it is in local and particular histories that we can appreciate the significance of the ‘early modern’ most forcibly,” because this will make us realize how profoundly multi-centered the historical moment of modernity was. It is now well established that between 1658 and 1693, cotton textiles from India accounted for 30 percent of the total value (in pound sterling) of England’s export to western Africa, and another 21 percent of that export was made up of cowries obtained from the

---


Maldive Islands in the Indian Ocean. In turn, enslaved Africans accounted for 55, 69, 81.8, and 79 percent of the average annual value of export commodities produced in the Americas during the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, respectively. The silver bullion from the Americas that monetized the Indian economy and the cowries from the Maldive Islands that monetized the Bight of Benin economy quickened the pace of social change in both regions. Hence, the Indian Ocean trade made the Atlantic trade possible, but neither would have been possible without African slave labor in the Americas. Europe, however, had advantages that the rest of the world did not have in the making of early modernity: it linked different parts of the world in a global economic system—through transportation and colonialism. Early modernity, then, must be seen as the process, condition, and consequences of a global world linked together by European merchant capital, but that world was not defined by Europe. Thus there cannot be a uniform set of cultural and institutional parameters for judging early modernity.

The comparative approach has been most successful in unraveling the autonomy and interconnections of experience that grew out of the pre–early modern contacts, as well as the autonomy and transformations of the structures through which those experiences unfolded. Despite the differences in temporalities and cultures, there is “a certain universality in the human condition,” to borrow from Raymond Grew, that makes comparative approaches always germane to the task of identifying new historical questions, developing appropriate research designs, and generating new historical causative factors, whether these refer to asynchronic or synchronic temporality. The emphasis of social and cultural history on everyday lives and the material circumstances that conditioned those lives also makes comparative thinking feasible for transcending the artificial boundaries of temporalities as well as real and imagined geographies. But such comparisons cannot proceed on the basis of exclusionary usage of sources that are not common to the different societies that made early modernity possible. There are many sites of early modern cultural production, social agencies, intellectual reflections, state bureaucracies, court life, mentalities, and political systems to compare and contrast, in India and in western Africa, but not all of them used writing as the medium of their intellectual activities. In fact, the challenges of comparison may become insurmountable, and the spatial-temporal silos may be reinforced, when the student of comparative history is unwilling to go...
beyond the familiar sources and theories on which the historical exceptionalism of a particular geography has been built. Hence, not only does O’Hanlon’s privileging of writing-based intellectual discourses as the character of early modernity in southern India come close to reinforcing the misplaced view of Europe as the paragon of modernity, with South Asia as its mimic, but it also has the unintended consequence of foreclosing the possibility of comparison with Atlantic Africa and the other sites of early modernity. In order for the objectives of the comparative approach to be successful, a multi-scalar methodological approach is needed that will not only take into consideration different sources but also create a common vocabulary appropriate for intercultural translations of historical experience.61

The issues raised by these three essays are relevant to a return to the idea of total history, which was pioneered by Giambattista Vico, Jules Michelet, and Jacob Burckhardt, followed later by the Annales school, especially in the works of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, and to which a number of Africanists have already contributed important empirical and methodological insights.62 Many of them have done well to clear the fog of the anachronistic dichotomies between the “pre” and the “modern.” However, the most successful are those that enable us to think across different epochs in the historical study of practice, tradition, and the human condition. They are also those that have at least sought to uncover the depth of past genealogies out of which the present is made, using all the multidimensional sources that are capable of disclosing different kinds of historical knowledge cross-culturally and in the long term. With a forum such as this, we may be close to the end of prehistory.

61 Jörn Rüsen, “Some Theoretical Approaches to Intercultural Comparative Historiography,” History and Theory 35, no. 4 (1996): 5–22. However, the comparative approach must not lapse into decontextualized ecological, neurological, and genetic determinism that purports to find the ultimate causative explanations or general laws for historical contingents and practice in the uniformitarian science of generic man.

62 Their commitment to expansive methodology and total history was foundational to what would later become social and cultural history. For an assessment, see Katherine Stirling, “Rereading Marc Bloch: The Life and Works of a Visionary Modernist,” History Compass 5, no. 2 (2007): 525–538; John R. Hinde, Jacob Burckhardt and the Crisis of Modernity (Montreal, 2000); Mali, Mythistory; Robert C. Miner, Vico, Genealogist of Modernity (Notre Dame, Ind., 2002).

Akinwumi Ogundiran is Professor of Africana Studies, Anthropology, and History at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, where he also serves as Chair of the Africana Studies Department. His publications include Archaeology and History in Ilare District (Central Yorubaland, Nigeria), 1200–1900 A.D. (Archaeopress, 2002) and Power and Landscape in Atlantic West Africa (Cambridge, 2012), co-edited with J. Cameron Monroe. He is working on a book manuscript that focuses on the cultural history of the Yoruba Atlantic world. Ogundiran is also the director of the Upper Osun Archaeological and Historical Project, a two-part research endeavor on the political economy and cultural history of the Oyo Empire, circa 1575–1830, and the cultural and landscape history of the Osun-Osogbo sacred grove, sixteenth century to the present.