

UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY

Africa

third edition



edited by

April A. Gordon & Donald L. Gordon

THIRD EDITION

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Preface

The first edition of *Understanding Contemporary Africa* was the culmination of nearly three years of collaborative thought, research, and writing by a dedicated group of Africanist scholars and teachers. On the basis of informal conversations, and then in a broader survey of other Africanists teaching at the undergraduate level, we discovered that most of us were finding it difficult to locate a good, up-to-date text on sub-Saharan Africa to use in our introductory courses. Available texts were, for the most part, too discipline-oriented—created especially for history, anthropology, or political science courses; they were too advanced for students with little prior background; or they were dated. On the other hand, some introductory texts on the market tried to do too much; they were so broad in scope that they lacked the theoretical base or scholarly depth we were looking for. This left professors compelled to use multiple readings from several different books and periodicals to cover their topics. We decided that for us, as well as for many other teachers of “Introduction to Africa” courses, the availability of a single text designed to address important contemporary topics and to provide background from a variety of academic subject areas would be an attractive alternative. It would save many of us from lengthy searches for material, time wasted with library reserve procedures, or an expensive panoply of required book purchases.

Addressing the above concerns provided the rationale for this book. The success of the book since the first edition in 1992 confirms our belief that *Understanding Contemporary Africa*, with its broad scope, up-to-date and in-depth chapters, and attention to readability for undergraduate students, is a valuable text for both general African studies courses and discipline-based courses. It covers many of the most important topics and issues needed for a grasp of the reality of sub-Saharan Africa in the early twenty-first century—for example, the environment, women’s roles, population, AIDS, and urbanization—that get little or no treatment in other texts.

The information in each chapter of the book represents the best of the current research and thinking in various fields of study, providing students and professors with a useful background on Africa, and also presenting major issues in a way students can understand. And, although each chapter is designed to stand alone, the authors have produced a well-integrated

volume, referring in their own chapters to complementary ideas discussed elsewhere in the book. This allows instructors to assign readings to meet their needs—by chapter or by topic, for instance—at the same time that the book helps students to see the connections among issues or events and reinforces what they may have read earlier.

In the introduction that follows this preface, the scope and themes of the book are discussed. Next, chapters on the geography and history of sub-Saharan Africa provide the background necessary for understanding what follows. (Readers should refer to the maps in the geography chapter when reading later chapters of the book.) The remaining chapters cover major institutions and issues confronting sub-Saharan Africa today. While each chapter provides historical background, the emphasis is on the vital concerns facing Africa now and in the future. Central among these concerns are African political and economic systems and issues, which are discussed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Tied closely to political and economic policies and trends are population growth, urbanization, AIDS, and environmental problems, as covered in Chapters 7 and 8. Next we address African family and kinship systems; without an awareness of how Africans understand kinship, issues like “tribalism” and corruption are difficult to comprehend and often misconstrued by outsiders. Women in Africa are the focus of Chapter 10; as this chapter shows, social change in Africa is affecting women much differently than it is men, and often to the disadvantage of women and Africa as a whole. In Chapters 11 and 12, on African religion and literature, the focus shifts to the ideological sphere—to how Africans explain and attempt to grapple with the complexities of their world and their place in it.

Chapter 13 is different from the others because it deals with one country, South Africa. In the 1980s and 1990s, South Africa captured the attention of the outside world as its black majority struggled to break the shackles of centuries of racist oppression. Although white-ruled South Africa was in many ways an anomaly on the continent, we think it is important that students understand the history of apartheid, the liberation struggle, and current efforts to create a new democratic South Africa in which people of all races can live together and prosper. With its unique and diverse mixture of Western, African, and Asian ethnic groups and identities, South Africa is considered to be a test case of the extent to which Western-style democracy evolves—or fails—in Africa (Chabal and Daloz, 1999:157). As such, we feel it continues to merit its own place in the book.

In a brief chapter on trends and prospects, which follows the discussion of South Africa, we assess where sub-Saharan Africa may be heading. While we do not attempt to predict any specific outcomes, we do note that many African countries are attempting political and economic reform; some are making real progress while others are teetering on the brink of disaster. In all countries, new leaders are emerging, replacing those who assumed power at independence. Whether the new generation shaping the

Africa of the future will improve on the record of the past still remains very much an open question.

* * *

Writing and editing this book has left us indebted to a number of people.

Our research was aided especially by summer research grants from the University of Florida African Studies Center under the direction of Hunt Davis, to whom we are most grateful. Prior research at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex and help from Charles Harvey were also important and appreciated.

In a different way each of us is obligated to Mark DeLancey of the University of South Carolina. Mark's leadership and professionalism as an Africanist are well known. For us both, a Fulbright program in Cameroon under Mark's direction was an academic high point. For April Gordon, Mark's introduction to Africa was the inspiration for a career focused on the continent. In addition, April owes much to several people at Winthrop University. The moral support, release time, and staff aid generously given by Jack Tucker, chair of the Sociology Department, were vital. Furthermore, Al Lyles, former dean of arts and sciences, and Betsy Brown, the current dean, approved summer stipends and release time; the Winthrop Research Council provided additional financial assistance; and former dean Robin Bowers was kind enough to fund a 1994 Council for International Education Exchange trip to Zimbabwe. Most recently, in 2000, April was awarded sabbatical leave, which allowed her to spend six weeks in southern Africa to gather material for this new edition of the text.

Don Gordon is obliged to many people at Furman University. A special debt is owed to Jim Guth, former chair of the Department of Political Science, for his help in arranging blocks of time for Don to concentrate on this book, and for his advice as a professional editor. In addition, Don is grateful to the former dean of Furman University, John H. Crabtree Jr., and the current dean, A. V. Huff, for their strong support for research trips to Zimbabwe and Malawi and for Africa Study Programs in Egypt, Kenya, Tanzania, and southern Africa. Don's research and travel were also underwritten by the Research and Professional Growth Committee of Furman University.

While the impetus for writing this book came from many sources, much of it can be traced to Don Gordon's long-term association with the National Model Organization of African Unity Simulation directed by Michael Nwanze at Howard University. We are both indebted to Michael, to Jack Parson of the College of Charleston, to Ed Baum of Ohio University, and to the other highly committed Africanist professors who made this educational event so successful and from whom we have learned much about how undergraduates learn about Africa.

We extend our thanks to Mary Lou Ingram at the World Bank for her generosity in providing us with most of the photographs we used in the book.

Our gratitude to our chapter authors and other contributors to this book is as broad as the African continent. We thank them for their expertise and for their commitment to expanding an appreciation for Africa, not only in this book but in their work in the classroom.

Foremost, we thank our family: our sons, Aaron and Jared, were young children when the first edition of this book was being written. They are now old enough to realize that the time and energy the book took (sometimes away from them) was well spent. Indeed, Aaron recently read our book as the textbook in his university introductory course on Africa! Last, we thank Lela, whose fifty years in the classroom are a model to us all.

—April A. Gordon,
Donald L. Gordon

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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
1 Introduction <i>April A. Gordon & Donald L. Gordon</i>	1
2 Africa: A Geographic Preface <i>Jeffrey W. Neff</i>	7
The Moving ITCZ 7	
Natural Regions 9	
Continents Adrift 11	
3 The Historical Context <i>Thomas O'Toole</i>	23
The Peopling of Africa 24	
Political Patterns of the Past 31	
Trade, Exploration, and Conquest 41	
The Colonial Period 48	
Conclusion 53	
4 African Politics <i>Donald L. Gordon</i>	55
The Impact of Colonialism 58	
Nationalism and the Politics of Independence 61	
The Transfer of Power 66	
Independence 67	
The Centralization of State Power 68	
Patronage, the Patrimonial State, and Personal Rule 73	
Military Intervention 76	
The Political Economy of Decline 77	
State and Society in Crisis 80	
Structural Adjustment and the Reordering of the State 83	
Beyond Autocracy 86	
5 The Economies of Africa <i>Virginia DeLancey</i>	101
Precolonial Economies 101	
The Influence of Colonialism 103	
Postcolonial Development Strategies 106	
Current Issues 112	

6	African International Relations	<i>Peter J. Schraeder</i>	143
	The Dependency-Decolonization Debate	144	
	The Formulation and Implementation of African Foreign Policies	145	
	Pan-Africanism and the Organization of African Unity	150	
	Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration	155	
	The Role of Foreign Powers in African International Relations	160	
	The United Nations and International Financial Institutions	170	
	The Changing Equation of Military Intervention	175	
	Toward the Future	180	
7	Population, Urbanization, and AIDS	<i>April A. Gordon</i>	189
	Precolonial and Colonial Periods	192	
	Postindependence Trends	195	
	Family Planning	199	
	Urban Population Policy	202	
	AIDS in Africa	207	
8	Africa's Environmental Problems	<i>Julius E. Nyang'oro</i>	217
	The Environment in Africa	219	
	Contemporary Problems of the African Environment	221	
	Development and the Environment	233	
	Other Issues of Environmental Concern	235	
	Conclusion	238	
9	Family and Kinship	<i>Eugenia Shanklin</i>	245
	African Kinship and Marriage	250	
	New Areas of Study and Holdovers from the Past in Contemporary African Societies	258	
	Challenges to Contemporary African Kinship Systems	262	
10	Women and Development	<i>April A. Gordon</i>	271
	Women in Precolonial Africa	272	
	European Penetration	276	
	The Postindependence Period	278	
	Women in the Economy	279	
	Women and Politics	284	
	Prospects for African Women	290	
11	Religion in Africa	<i>Ambrose Moyo</i>	299
	African Traditional Religions	301	
	Christianity in Africa	308	
	Islam in Africa	318	
	Conclusion	325	

12	African Literature <i>George Joseph</i>	331
	African Oral Literature 332	
	Written Literature in African Languages 338	
	African Literature in European Languages 339	
	Conclusion 364	
13	South Africa <i>Patrick J. Furlong</i>	371
	The Peopling of South Africa 373	
	The Roots of Racial Discrimination 374	
	The Advent of the British Factor 375	
	The Mineral Revolution 378	
	The United Settler State 380	
	Nationalist Rule and the Creation of the Apartheid State 384	
	The Attempt to Modernize Apartheid 388	
	Dismantling the Apartheid State 392	
	The Tortuous Road to a New South Africa 395	
	Conclusion 401	
14	Trends and Prospects <i>April A. Gordon & Donald L. Gordon</i>	409
	Poverty Reduction 411	
	Debt 412	
	Trade and Investment 414	
	Aid 416	
	Information Technology 417	
	<i>List of Acronyms</i>	421
	<i>Glossary</i>	425
	<i>Basic Political Data</i>	439
	<i>The Contributors</i>	457
	<i>Index</i>	459
	<i>About the Book</i>	477

Illustrations

■ MAPS

2.1	Major Physical Features and Regions	17
2.2	Natural Regions and ITCZ Location	18
2.3	Linkages and Resources	19
2.4	Early States and Empires	20
2.5	Africa in 1914	21
2.6	Countries and Capitals	22
7.1	HIV in Africa	209
11.1	Islam in Africa	326
13.1	South Africa, 1991	372

■ TABLES

5.1	Africa's Commodity Dependence	108
7.1	Urban Growth in African Cities	190
7.2	Crude Birthrates, Total Fertility Rates, and Contraceptive Usage Rates	197

■ PHOTOGRAPHS

Pastoralists in the unpredictable environment of the Sahel	8
The semi-arid Sahel	10
Improving infrastructure	13
Herdin societies in Africa	28
Much African agriculture is hoe-farming	28
Most Africans have long relied on decentralized, kinship-based political systems	32
Great Zimbabwe	38
Independence rally in Luanda, Angola	62
Headquarters of the Zimbabwe ruling party ZANU-PF	72
The military is an important political actor in most African states	76

In 1990 multiparty elections were held in Côte d'Ivoire	87
African economies are highly dependent on export crops	110
Much of the infrastructure of roads, railways, and ports has deteriorated	114
Government control over prices paid to farmers	123
The informal sector	128
Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire	146
Jean-Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Republic committed large-scale atrocities	164
Nairobi has experienced explosive population growth	191
Children are a vital economic resource in extended family systems	198
Squatters construct their homes in a settlement in Lusaka, Zambia	205
Mothers and their young children are at high risk of getting AIDS	208
Growing land scarcity is leading to deforestation, soil erosion, and desertification	222
Commercial logging	222
Desertification threatens many areas of Africa	227
Scenes of human suffering are becoming commonplace in Africa	229
In some African countries, elephant populations are growing	238
Bridewealth and polygyny reflect the vital productive contributions of women to the family	257
A self-employed father teaches his son to make charcoal burners	263
Many people have been forced to rely on relief organizations during recent droughts and civil war	265
African women play vital economic roles as well as being mothers	274
Women preparing food and fetching water	280
Women grow most of the food in Africa	281
In Senegal, the government is trying to encourage families to educate their girls	282
Women's contributions to national development are receiving greater attention in many African countries	291
Masks are used to represent ancestors and other spiritual figures	300
A cathedral in Bangui, Central African Republic	311
A mosque in Nairobi, Kenya	319
The Wolof <i>griot</i> Yoro M'Baye	333
A selection of African literature	340
The Sharpeville massacre in South Africa	386
Nelson Mandela addresses well-wishers in New York City	393
Mounting violence in South Africa's black townships threatened to derail the peace process	396
Voters in line at a polling station in South Africa, 1994	398

Introduction

April A. Gordon and Donald L. Gordon

Most people know very little about sub-Saharan Africa, and most of what they do know is only partially correct or based on stereotypes or an inadequate historical or conceptual framework for understanding and interpretation. For instance, it is not uncommon to find people who believe that Africa is a land of primitive stone-age hunters and gatherers living in the jungle (the Africa of Tarzan movies). Another idea is that Africans are an especially violent people who practice cannibalism, believe in cruel religions and gods, and conduct endemic tribal warfare. At the other extreme are images of Africans as innocents unaware of modern life, like the “Bushman” hero of the movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. The media tend to reinforce these perceptions, especially with their almost exclusive focus on negative news, such as drought and famine, civil war, or widespread poverty. While these phenomena certainly exist, there is far more to Africa and its people. Moreover, where Africa is suffering from problems like drought, civil war, and poverty, it is important to know why and what has been or should be done about such tragedies.

Understanding Contemporary Africa has been written to provide the basic concepts, theoretical perspectives, and essential information that are necessary for understanding the dynamic, as well as troubled, region that is Africa today. This book is mainly about sub-Saharan Africa, Africa south of the Sahara. While some mention is made of North Africa, Africa’s Asiatic communities, and white settlers (especially in South Africa), those interested in these topics will need to consult additional sources. The authors have written in depth on the most important issues and institutions in Africa. Although these writers are from different disciplines and each chapter is more or less self-contained, a broad portrait of sub-Saharan Africa is discernible.

Geographically, Africa is a massive continent, roughly three and a half times larger than the United States. Africa’s range of climates, topography,

and physical beauty have created conditions conducive to the formation of an immense diversity of peoples and cultures. Africa is in fact the “home” of humankind, in which every means of livelihood from gathering and hunting to industrialism can be found. At the same time, the enormity of the continent and its often harsh ecological conditions, such as extremes of oppressive heat, vast deserts, marginal soils, and expanses of subtropical vegetation, left many groups relatively isolated from other parts of the world until the last few centuries and limited the concentrations of population and resources that led to the more technologically complex societies of the “old world” and industrial Europe. Despite this relative isolation, some societies had contact with regions as distant as North Africa, India, and even China. Regardless, all developed intricate cultures with rich religious and artistic traditions and complex social and kinship relations.

As is true of other areas of the world, sub-Saharan Africa’s history is fraught with episodes of upheaval, violence, and cultural challenges generated from both internal and external forces. For instance, movements of people within the continent led to cross-cultural exchange of ideas, goods, and people as well as to conflict. Foreign religions, mainly Christianity and Islam, were carried by outsiders and resulted in challenges and conflicts not only with local religious beliefs but with long-established customs and ways of life. At the same time, these religions have been incorporated into African societies, changing both in the process. There have also been periods of peace and prosperity in which Africans could live out their lives in relative security and contentment, partly because most lacked the extreme class stratification and state structures that led to so much oppression and exploitation in so-called civilized areas of the world.

Beginning in the 1500s, Africa’s history began to commingle with that of an expansionist West in pursuit of trade, booty, and exotic lands and people to conquer. This eventuated in the most cruel and disruptive period in African history, starting with the slave trade and culminating in colonial domination of the continent. This reached its most extreme form in South Africa, whose African majority was ruled until recently by the white descendants of its European colonizers.

Along with its other effects, the Western penetration of Africa exposed Africans to the material riches and culture of the West. As Bohannon and Curtin (1995:15) observe, Africans were not deprived before Western penetration of their societies. Many lived fulfilling lives of great dignity, content without the “trappings of Western civilization.” However, once exposed to the possibilities of Western civilization, the lure has proven to be almost irresistible in Africa and elsewhere.

The influence of the West and Western culture is the major transformative force in Africa today. By responding to the promise of acquiring Western affluence, Africans across the continent, to varying degrees, are being integrated into the worldwide network of trade and productive relationships

sometimes called “the global capitalist economy.” This global economy is dominated for the most part by the few rich, politically and militarily powerful countries of Europe and by the United States—countries that initially gained much of their preeminence from the exploitation of Africans (and other Third World people). As slaves or colonial subjects, Africans’ labor and resources (usually obtained directly or indirectly by coercion) provided many of the low-cost raw materials for Western factories and affluent consumer lifestyles.

Since colonialism, African cash crops, minerals, and fuels have continued to be transported overseas, while Western manufactured goods, technology, financial capital, and Western lifestyles are imported to Africa. So far, the “integration” of Africa into the global economy has largely gone badly for most countries on the continent as the cost of Western imports compared to the prices of African exports has become increasingly unfavorable to Africa, leaving almost all countries in debt, their economies a shambles, and living standards spiraling downward. Only a minority of Africans have been able to acquire more than a few tokens of the promised life the West symbolizes.

Another import from the West is Western political systems. Like a hand-me-down suit never fitted to its new wearer, Western multiparty political systems, hastily handed over to Africans experienced mainly in colonial despotism, did not “fit.” Most degenerated into one-party states or military dictatorships riddled with corruption and inefficiency. Opposition to the state was either co-opted or ruthlessly repressed. Expected to be the architects of development for their people, African states instead became largely self-serving, bloated bureaucracies alienated from the masses for whom “development” became a more remote prospect as economies began deteriorating from the 1970s on.

Making things worse were the unprecedented growth of population in Africa and the rapid expansion of urban areas. In part, these two related trends both reflected and exacerbated economic and political problems. Certainly, agrarian societies like Africa’s value large families. Nonetheless, African family sizes are considerably in excess of those found in most other developing regions. In Africa, inadequate investment in farming, especially in food crops grown mostly by women, keeps most agriculture highly “labor intensive” (dependent on labor rather than machines). Since mainly it is men who migrate to cities for work, women need children more than ever to help them with farm chores. Moreover, as patronage relationships based on ethnicity and kinship are often vital to gaining access to resources (such as jobs, schooling, or money), children are valuable assets even in affluent urban families. For many Africans resources are shrinking because of mounting political and economic problems. Structural adjustment programs (SAPs), designed ostensibly to combat these problems, often compound the hardships instead. The neglect of agriculture and lack

of opportunity in rural areas along with the expansion of wage jobs in cities inevitably attract job seekers. Unfortunately, their numbers are far greater than the capacity of cities to employ them or adequately service their needs. The resulting discontent of urbanites is frequently the basis of political opposition to whatever regime is in power and contributes to the problems of political repression and instability.

The way Africans have tried to develop their economies, often on the basis of Western development advice, has indirectly promoted population growth and urbanization by favoring industry, export production, and cities over rural areas. It has also discriminated against women and neglected their interests as producers, mothers, and individuals, with detrimental effects on the economy and social welfare. It has also contributed to environmental degradation, especially soil erosion, deforestation, and desertification. Land scarcity is affecting growing numbers of poor farmers and pastoralists. Lack of resources or technology to improve methods of production, along with lack of opportunity to make a living elsewhere, leaves many people with little recourse to cultivating or grazing their cattle on fragile or marginal land and destroying trees. Western multinational corporations and development agencies, often in league with African business or state elites, have also been guilty of pursuing economic "growth" and profits at the expense of the environment.

As gloomy as this picture of Africa looks, we must remember that African independence is less than forty years old for most countries. Africans are a practical and adaptive people, as their history and cultures clearly show. Africans have not been locked in hopelessly outmoded traditions, as stereotypes sometimes suggest. Rather, they have always taken from other traditions and cultures what they perceived to be valuable for their own. African resilience and flexibility are in evidence now as in the past. Africans have been experimenting for well over a thousand years with Islam and Christianity and more recently with secular religions such as socialism, capitalism, and Marxism-Leninism, blending them in often quixotic stews with indigenous African practices. That such experimentation produces mixed results should be expected. As Goran Hyden (1983) notes in the title of his book on Africa, there are "no shortcuts to progress," a hard lesson being learned by many Africans whose expectations for quick development have been sharply downscaled as a result of recent trends.

African cultures remain vibrant and are playing a leading role in the efforts to cope with and assess the forces affecting African societies. Questions of personal and collective identity and meaning frequently come to the fore as well as discontent with political oppression, foreign exploitation, and economic inequality and poverty. These concerns are clearly manifested in new forms of religious expression, literature, and political movements for democratization. The extended family remains a vital

refuge for most Africans, although the Western nuclear family and challenges to male dominance are growing.

Until recently, it was easy and convenient to blame Africa's problems on the West, and for the most part accurate. The negative legacy of colonialism has been especially profound. Many scholars still contend that the role Africa has been assigned in the global economy as a producer of cheap raw materials continues to prevent it from achieving its economic potential. At least partial blame for Africa's political problems such as coups d'état and authoritarian rule could be laid at the West's doorstep. After all, the West often has had a major role in deciding who came to power or stayed in power. Typically, Western interference in African politics has been determined mostly by geopolitical or economic interests rather than by such lofty goals as democracy or good government. This is apparent in the support accorded dictators like former president Mobutu Sese Seko (now deceased) of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) as well as Western complicity (until recently) in maintaining the brutal apartheid system in South Africa.

As the colonial period recedes in time, more critical attention is being focused on Africans themselves, especially their leaders. This represents, for the most part, a growing awareness that Africans are not simply pawns in the machinations of self-interested Western multinational corporations, bankers, or governments. More Africans are acknowledging that they must address their own shortcomings and institute reforms, be they political, economic, social, or religious renewal. By themselves, such reforms are unlikely to overcome all the inequities of the global economic and political order over which Africa has little control; but only an enlightened and competent African leadership can hope to mobilize the energy and commitment of its people for the challenges that lie ahead.

One of the greatest of these challenges is the HIV/AIDS crisis sweeping many countries. Most of the world's victims of this dreadful disease are in Africa, and AIDS continues to spread. Even with a massive commitment of resources to combat AIDS (which currently does not exist), much of the improvement Africa has experienced economically and in extending the life and well-being of its people will be undermined as AIDS continues to run its relentless course.

As Africa enters the first decade of the twenty-first century, we must keep some historical perspective to avoid pessimism about the continent's prospects. We must remember that profound societal transformations are under way and that such change often entails considerable suffering, alienation, and disruptions that may take generations to resolve. Mao Zedong, the leader of postrevolutionary China, was once asked by author Edgar Snow what he thought was the significance of the French Revolution. Mao's sage reply was, "I think it's a little too early to tell" (in Whitaker,