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## African History in Comparative Perspective

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### General Background

History is as inherently comparative as it is contemporary, thus identifying the discipline as the main cutting edge of the humanities into the social sciences. There is an undeniable connection between the subject of study, the human past, on one hand, and, on the other, the historian, alive and present. Even to this important extent of the inter-temporal link between the historian and his subject, there is an acknowledgement, though more implicit than explicit, of the comparative impulse. Where, as is the case with many historians, research and/or teaching engagements are about societies and cultures other than their own, the spatial or the cross-cultural are then consciously or unconsciously combined with the inter-temporal dimensions of the comparative disposition.

However, while comparison is in the very nature of history, the prism worn by mainstream historians commits them to the exploration of the discipline as a dealing with the unique and the incurably specific. Even when working on localities within the same national state, often the main framework of their generally nationalistically predetermined preoccupations, historians as was once observed of those in Zambia (Rennie 1980) as also the United States (Woodward 1968 and Strauss 1979), behave like miners ‘too intent on their hole and too unaware of the researcher in the hole next door, also frantically digging’.

Over time and space, over-concentration and over-specialisation in specific localities and regions make appreciation of other localities and regions unattractive, thus crippling the potentials for wider regional syntheses and vital contributions to world history projects.

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This closet mind-set has been particularly noticeable in the development and growth of African historical scholarship. By Africans and Africanists alike, the latter term often used to refer to non-African experts in African studies, African history has for too long been pursued more as a concern for Africa and Africans than as one of concern for man in Africa. Originating in the 1940s when it began largely as a response to challenges of European colonialist historiography and a major intellectual effort for dealing with the colonialist denial of African human identity and supporting the emergent nationalist movements, African historical scholarship was eventually appropriated as an instrument in the service of the subsequent nation-building agenda.

The demand for postgraduate training and the associated requirement for originality of the resultant doctoral theses and dissertations, more often based on newness of data derived from primary sources such as archives and oral traditions, gave rise to a long sustained era and tradition of monographic studies focussed on relatively small and well-defined manageable areas or localities, usually of the different emerging modern states. This has meant a virtual absence of efforts at explicit comparative analyses and syntheses. Although certain general national and wider regional histories were initially produced (for example Basil Davidson on Africa, and Michael Crowder on Nigeria and West Africa), many of such general titles were derided by the new breed of professional historians who looked down on works that, rather than based on primary sources, are dependent on secondary literature.

Even when they deal with such obviously widely shared problems and experiences as state formations and expansions, slavery, European imperialism and colonialism, nationalism, regionalism and globalisation, African and Africanist historians labour without any explicit acknowledgement of the case-study nature of their otherwise excellent studies, and they are hardly known to engage in explicitly comparative research designs or to attempt to draw generalisations for wider areas than are specifically the focus of the study. The overall effect of these tendencies and trends has been the inability of most African and Africanist historians to present their works as compelling contributions to world history and permit such works to be enriched by comparative perspectives on or from other regional orientations.

The articles in this special edition of *Afrika Zamani* originate from the papers presented at the Specialised Theme One (African History in Comparative Perspective: New Approaches) empanelled at the Twentieth Congress of the International Committee of the Historical Science in Sydney, Australia, 9 to 13 July 2005.

This panel was put together in order to emphasise the comparative perspective as one of the new approaches to African historical scholarship that one would like to see adopted and systematically explored in the twenty-first century. If by the end of the twentieth century, initial doubts about African identity and the scientific viability of African historical scholarship have been effectively dispelled, there appears no further justification for persistence in the tradition of chauvinism and isolation that has tended towards a patently inaccurate and totally unacceptable vision of Africa as a unique and incomparable region of the world, and Africans as peculiar peoples. While not denying the doctrine of spatio-temporal particularity of historical events, a widely recognised antiquity of interactions with other peoples and lands, including those in Asia, Europe, the Americas and Oceania, as well as scientifically acknowledged contributions to origins and growth of civilisation plus current challenges of regional integration and globalisation, all dictate the urgency for a repositioning within wider contexts of shared experiences and the imperative of a comparative approach to research and teaching of African history in the twenty-first century.

The comparative perspective is compelling on other grounds. One is in the ever-increasing indications that the days of the so-called 'data revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s would appear numbered. It is not that there are no new data to be discovered or that every corner and cranny of every African nation has been covered for its own local history. It is, rather, that the future is one of interest less in detailed local histories, however well researched and written, than wider regional syntheses and analyses that would permit African historians to get into a sustained dialogue with other social scientists, including historians of other lands and peoples. Unlike in the 1950s, when the main challenge was in the observable insufficiency of historical source material, the end of the twentieth century has been marked by an incredible accumulation of processed data, thanks to the massive and sustained exploration of not only archival and oral sources, both within and outside the continent, but also of phenomenal progress made in such ancillary sciences as archaeology and linguistics.

Apart from the impressive works carried out by African scholars themselves, based in the several universities and specialised research institutions established in the new independent states (notably Ibadan, Nigeria; Legon, Accra, Ghana; Dakar, Senegal; Makerere, Kampala, Uganda; Dar-Es-Salam, Tanzania; Cairo, Egypt; and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia), there was in the 1960s through the 1970s a mushrooming of mostly history-biased African Studies Programmes in Europe, North America and Asia as well as the establishment of specialised learned societies such as the African Studies Associa-

tions of both the United States of America and of the United Kingdom, following such earlier African examples as the Historical Society of Nigeria founded at Ibadan in 1955. This era of ‘data revolution’, which witnessed a virtually unending production of monographic publications on so many culture areas and major historic regions of Africa, would appear to have begun to ebb and wane in the 1980s, giving rise to an ever-increasing quest for works of broader sweeps or syntheses at both national and wider regional levels. While the publication in 1980 of *Groundwork of Nigerian History* by the Historical Society of Nigeria may be taken to illustrate the response at a national level, the achievement a few years later of the eight volume *UNESCO General History of Africa* exemplifies the efforts at a wider regional level. These efforts must be advanced in the twenty-first century to a global level, and enriched by explicitly comparative perspectives and specific research designs.

But as has been more fully discussed by Przeworski and Teune (1970), comparative history, strictly so identified, including the solicited perspective on Africa, poses significant conceptual and methodological challenges, focussing largely on the need to draw generalisations and make general statements about social realities contrary to the disciplinary canon that such realities are meaningful only in the context of specific spatio-temporal locations. In comparative history, the doctrinal position is further complicated by the factor of emotionalism which on all sides tends towards the denial of comparability, for example, between Africa and Africans on the one hand, and on the other, lands and peoples of other regions, especially those of present-day post-industrialised societies of the North.

Take, for example, the issues of European imperialist partition and subsequent divergent colonial regimes, two of the three major conceptually overlapping themes in African comparative historical experiences on which significant works have been done, the third inter-related theme being the question of modern state boundaries as critical factors in regional integrated processes. First, the themes of European partition and differential colonial rule. Although the overlapping subjects of European partition and differential colonial rule enjoyed early and tremendous attention by African and European historians, the pioneers were not so attentive to the advantages of a comparative focus. Thus, in spite of the possibility and profitability of situating the African experience within a global context of the history and politics of territorial partition and parallel nationalisation processes, including the many important manifestations in contemporary Europe and other continents, African and Africanist historians continued to lament about Africa as if it was the most badly, if not the only, partitioned continent, and Africans as if they were the only partitioned peoples. The issue of comparability has to

await the availability of confirming in-depth case studies of the African and European situations such as those undertaken by this writer (Asiwaju 1976, 1984a, 1984b and 2001), William Miles (1990, 1994 and 1998) and Peter Sahlin (1989). Our *Boundaries and African Integration: Essays in Comparative History and Policy Analysis* (2003) is a collection of previously published writings on the subject, focussing mainly on the Western European and North American comparative perspectives on Africa.

These direct involvements and actual experience in comparative historical research in Africa point to some of the ways of meeting the methodological challenges that are posed. These include, first and foremost, the obligation to carefully define the units and levels of the analyses. As may be illustrated with the pioneer Yoruba case study, acknowledged as the model for the more distinguished follow-up work on the Hausa, and fascinatingly complemented by the European case history of the Catalans astride the Franco-Spanish border in the eastern Pyrenees, the specific focus is on two leading European imperialist state systems, the French and the British, as both simultaneously operated in an African 'laboratory' environment of significantly homogeneous culture and shared historical antecedents – the Western Yoruba astride a specific segment of the Nigeria-Dahomey (now Benin) border during the heydays of colonial rule in West Africa. Comparative research in history, as in the other social sciences, is meaningful only and only if and when it is sharply focussed. The case studies all focussed on the experience of partitioned peoples and culture areas, and also showed that once the units and levels of analysis are clearly defined, a comparative research design in history can be pursued to achieve the same kind of originality as non-comparative single-system undertakings, based on maximum exploration of primary sources and data derived from archives and oral evidence.

The lived experiences of a comparative focus on African historical scholarship has also demonstrated that, as in other comparative social inquiries, the over-arching concern is with the possibility of making general statements or drawing generalisations. There is no other way of making sense of the adoption of a case-study approach, based on assumption of core commonalities or unities in the diversities of the social realities in focus. There is also a demand for certain conceptual clarifications of which, perhaps, the most challenging is the issue of 'comparability' and the associated requirement about 'measurement' or 'standardised language'. Comparative history takes the historian from the familiar direction of specialisation in given areas of the world at some particular era, and puts him on a new and more challenging plane of expertise that enables him to participate distinctly in an inherently multi-disciplinary debate and dialogue for improved understanding and possible resolution of some well-defined social problems and

issues. The focus is less on Africa, Nigeria or the Yoruba, than identified as well as defined problems that are confronted and can be examined (see Asiwaju 2004) in terms of manifestations in other social systems. It is in this important sense that the attraction is more in thematic and synchronic analysis than a mere chronological account of historical events.

The concern of comparative research with the possibility and, in fact, the duty to make general statements about social realities, runs through our own research career. Thus, although some attempts were made in the pioneer Yoruba case study to draw some generalisations about African historical experience of differential colonial regimes, the dearth in the 1970s of similar full-scale case studies even of the French and British styles, to say nothing of other colonial types in Africa, made such efforts understandably cautious and timid; and it was, indeed, the search for a wider base for drawing generalisations more confidently that led to follow-up comparative research works, resulting in the publication in 1984 of the now well-known edited volume titled *Partitioned Africans: Ethnic Relations Across Africa's International Boundaries 1884-1984* (1984), and a series of other in-depth studies, more recently put together and published as a book under the title of *West African Transformations: Comparative Impacts of French and British Colonialism* (2001). The works by others, notably those of William Miles and Peter Sahlin (the one on Africa, Asia and Oceania, and the other on Europe) have since been added to those of several other authors, notably Oscar Martinez (1986 and 1994) and Blatter and Clement (2000) who have worked on European and North American comparative perspectives to strengthen our quest for generalisation, if not theorisation, about the special experience, not just of 'partitioned Africans', but, even more globally, 'trans-border peoples' or 'Border Communities', 'Caught in the Middle' in the 'era of globalisation', so well captioned in an elegant book co-edited by Demetrios Papademetriou and Deborah Meyers and published recently, in 2001, by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

It is essentially as an advocacy for this explicitly comparative focus on African historical scholarship, which has remained more the exception than the rule in the twentieth century, that a session on African History in Comparative Perspective was organised for the Twentieth Congress of the International Committee of Historical Sciences at Sydney, Australia, in July 2005. Contributions were solicited around issues broadly defined to include:

- Conceptual and theoretical concerns, notably concepts and methods of comparative history as have been or may be applied to Africa, to meet the challenges of 'Comparability';

- Specific themes based on widely shared historical experiences: ‘Frontier’ in African history, as manifested in accounts of indigenous state formations, expansions and disintegration; slavery; European imperialism and colonialism; nationalism and identity; modern state territories and boundaries; regional integration; urbanisation; peace, war and revolution; refugee problem; poverty; disease, gender; oral traditions;
- Regional and global canvases, that may address subjects and issues of inter-African or inter-continental interests and concerns;
- Pedagogical matters: including issues of methods and strategies for teaching African history in comparative perspective.

### **The Contributions**

Nine papers were eventually short-listed, covering a wide range of relevant issues of theoretical and empirical research interests. While the presentations manifest a diversity of spatio-temporal characteristics and perspectives, they together provide a suitable introduction to the sub-discipline of comparative history and its solicited exploration as a new approach to African historical scholarship in the twenty-first century.

This introductory note must begin with the three conceptual papers by Gareth Austin, Michal Tymowski and John Edward Philips (the first on ‘reciprocal comparison’ and its applicability to African history, and the other two on ‘the use of terms’ as problematised in respective discussions of the concepts of ‘empire’ in the historical research on Africa’ and ‘slavery as a Human Institution’), because of their common concern with the important preliminary issues of basic concepts and clarifying theorisation, so fundamental to any pursuit of our advocated focus of the comparative perspective on African history, but hitherto often ignored by mainstream African and Africanist historians. Whereas Austin’s paper points to the attraction of cross-cultural insights and perceptions, both Tymowski’s and Philips’s admirably confront the basic problem of ‘comparability’ and draw attention to the well-known escape window: a redefinition as ‘measurement’ with a requirement for ‘standardised language’.

Austin’s essay<sup>1</sup> focuses on the well-known problem of ‘Conceptual Eurocentrism’ in African historiography. It argues quite forcefully and persuasively that the way out is in the adoption of the principle of ‘reciprocal comparison’, recently developed by Kenneth Pomeranz in a book significantly titled *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (2001). To begin with the problem itself, it is perhaps pertinent to observe that ‘Conceptual Eurocentrism’ (i.e. the over-arching theorising influence of Europe-derived concepts and conceptual frameworks on the study

of African history) arose from the initial domination of the field by Europeans and the predominantly European training background of those who pioneered African historical scholarship in the mid-twentieth century. In its earliest and most extreme form, the problem manifested itself in the now thoroughly discredited colonialist historiographical formulation that denied the human identity of the black and cast doubts about the viability of African history, presenting it basically as a mere extension of European activities in the black man's continent. In its milder and most persistent versions, the problem became part and parcel of the larger problem of language: African and Africanist historians may have to live with at least some traits of 'conceptual Eurocentrism' for as long as the language they use is one of the official languages bequeathed to Africa by the erstwhile European colonial hegemonies.

While the problem has been significantly tackled through the giant strides made in the advancement of the African historical scholarship at the end of the twentieth century, thanks to revolutionary developments that have witnessed the scientific enthronements of oral traditions and such other internally generated sources of history that have improved the possibility of accessing indigenous Africans' viewpoints and perspectives about their own history, the positive developments have tended to pose the problem differently but not less worrisomely. The reference here is in the observable Afrocentrism, arising from an over-concentration on African viewpoints and perspectives. Indeed, as we have tried to suggest, there has been so much concentration on local and, at best, national history projects, that the main challenge to African historical scholarship today is in the new capacities that must be developed for situating future research concerns within wider regional and global contexts and weave the wide range of monographic studies that have accumulated over the past forty to fifty years into new syntheses that can contribute to an enhanced understanding of wider global historical patterns.

Austin's answers to the problem of 'conceptual Eurocentrism', which may be made to equally apply to the more current issue of Afrocentrism, is in the newfound land of 'reciprocal comparison: to ask [as in respect of Europe and China in the original formulation of the theory], equally why Europe was not China as well as why China was not Europe, as opposed to the traditional practice of taking Western Europe as the template'. Extended to Africa, this also means that we should ask why both 'Europe and China' were different from Africa, as well as why Africa was different from either or both. It is not in the service of a scientifically balanced position, to seek to see Africa only in an European mirror; Europe must also be placed in front of the African mirror. A similar endeavour should hold for Africa vis-à-vis other regions of

the world. The issues detailed in the call for papers for this panel, to which we have made an earlier reference, demonstrate that the scope for the application of the principle of 'reciprocal comparison' to African historical research can be immensely wider than the excellent examples provided in Austin's most fascinating presentation. Two telling examples that came to our notice during the CISH Congress in Sydney are the themes of 'holocaust' and 'terrorism', open for a systematic comparative research exploration for a more professional understanding of the history of European colonisation of non-European lands in North America, Australia and North Africa.

'Comparability', the heart of conceptual concern in comparative social inquiry, is also the key issue in comparative historical research, including the desired application to the study of Africa. Because social phenomena (for example, historical events) vary widely from one social system to another and because they occur in syndromes of specific spatial and temporal locations, endeavours at comparison are generally faced with the problem of measurement and appropriateness of language. Anyone with some relevant experience in cross-cultural or cross-national comparative work can bear witness to this problem of infinite variety of social systems and the inherently multi-variant levels of interactions between components within each system, thus posing a serious challenge to the twin issues of cross-system measurement and naming of events. It is in dealing with this problem that the rationale developed for the evolution of the notion of 'equivalence' and the adoption of 'cognitive model approach to definition of such basic concepts as 'state' and 'nation', to cite two of the common examples of social systems that historians deal with in the course of their comparative research.

Tymowski's paper on 'the use of the term "empire" in historical research on Africa' provides a most telling illustration of the problem of 'comparability' and the requirement for measurement and appropriateness of the 'measurement language'. Taking the reader through a critical literature review, beginning with Maurice Delafosse's popularisation of the concept in his pioneer essays on the ancient Western Sudanic States of Ghana, Mali and Songhai in 1912 and climaxing with pointers in the more professionally executed multi-volume UNESCO *General History of Africa* completed in 1985, Tymowski exposed the essential inconsistency in African and Africanist use of the term, 'empire', one of those concepts, including such others as 'Kingdom' and 'Feudalism,' which inevitably crept into the study of African history in the heydays of 'conceptual Eurocentrism'.

He then extrapolated the main features of African historic state formations that are usually labelled 'empire' in order to arrive at some broad African characteristics that can be used to evaluate the African pattern vis-à-vis non-African, notably European, historic examples that have been similarly

categorised. Tymowski then concludes that, with the possible exception of Ethiopia, the African historic states that are usually referred to in writings of so many generations of African and Africanist historians as ‘empires’ were really not more than historic formations, which elsewhere are referred to as ‘early empires’. But whether the African historic states in question are ‘empires’ or ‘early empires’, is not the concern of this introductory note. What is of more paramount interest is that Tymowski’s presentation has provided us with the illustration of the problem of ‘comparability’, and the associated need for standardisation of language or definition of operative concepts, which comparative African and Africanist historians can only ill ignore.

The paper by Philips on ‘Slavery as a Human Institution’ stands out as a watershed between the essentially theoretical and conceptual essays by Austin and Tymowski on the one hand, and on the other, the remainder of the six presentations in the session, largely devoted to the empirical treatment of specific topics. In a theoretically and empirically rich exposition of ‘slavery’ as a universal phenomenon in ‘human history’ and contemporary society, Philips has significantly advanced the argument about ‘comparability’ as, basically, a problem of ‘measurement’ and ‘standardised language’. The critical literature review, indicating strengths and weaknesses of both the ‘formal’ and ‘idealised cognitive model’ definitions of the basic concepts of ‘slave’ and ‘slavery’, demonstrates the requirement, not only for analytical rigour but also competence in inter-disciplinary communications.

Philips rejects a traditional approach to the discourse of ‘slavery’, based on characteristically restrictive ‘formal’ or ‘semantic’ definitions of the term. Instead, he advocates a new way of thinking based on a definition that is of a more global applicability. The reference here is to his brilliant elaboration of the ‘idealised cognitive model’ of definition, with a particular focus on the ‘radial’ variant of the model. This has enabled him to take the debate out of the confinement of ‘formal’ definitions of ‘slavery’, which had placed the North America-biased restrictive emphasis on the meaning of ‘slave’ as ‘property’. The new advocacy thus releases the discourse from the conceptual futility of having to either police the inherently ‘fuzzy’ and porous borders vis-à-vis such other semantically close neighbours as ‘serfdom’ and ‘peonage’ or engage in fruitless surgical operations to separate the inseparable cluster of such historic growths and extensions as ‘sporadic slavery’, ‘domestic slavery’, ‘chattel slavery’, ‘white slavery’, ‘elite slavery’ ‘forced labour’, ‘prostitution’ and ‘child labour’, as well as other products of modern ‘human trafficking’ in women and children. The adoption of the ‘radial’ variant of the cognitive-model definition of ‘slavery’ has facilitated Philips’s more inclu-

sive and more universalistic comparative account on, perhaps, one of the most influential issues in African and contemporary world history.

The next set of three papers, which open the session to presentations of strictly descriptive studies, are admirably thematically connected in their common focus on conceptually related issues of identity, national question, and regional integration, obviously matters of tremendous inter-African and wider global interest and sensitivity.

The essays by Bahru Zewde on 'Embattled Identity in Northeast Africa', Pierre Kipré on 'De la Question Nationale en Afrique Noire', and Nichodemus Awasom on 'Problems of Anglo-Saxonism and Gallicism in Nation-Building in Africa' are nicely inter-connected at more points than one. All three, for a start, commonly and correctly trace the origins of the problems to the history of modern state boundaries in the different sub-regions of Africa. All three are also unanimous in their view on regional integration as the most viable way out of the worrisome problem posed by nation-statism in Africa, the failures of 'federation' and 'confederation' experiments, specifically focussed by Awasom, notwithstanding. Finally, there is a common awareness and acknowledgement of the wider regional and global contexts and implications of the discussions in view of the resurgence of the closely related politics of ethnicity and ethno-nationalism, which have wreaked and are still wreaking havoc elsewhere in Africa, as in several Lake-Region States (Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo), post-Communist Europe, Asia and, in mostly muted forms, in North and Latin America, as well as Australia.

The papers by Zewde and Kipré are particularly close in content and orientation. Though based on data drawn from two distinct sub-regions of the continent, Northeast Africa in the one case and West Africa in the other, both presentations deal with conceptually identical issues of identity and the 'national question', and they both adopt a wider regional canvas and in-depth historical perspectives to the treatment of their inter-related subject matters. Unlike previous studies of the many instances of the invariably identity-concerned conflicts in the Horn (notably the Ethiopian-Eritrean, the Somalian and the Sudanese), where treatment is at the level of the individual constituent states and wherein the stress is on the present and current situations, the Northeastern African case study is an exemplar of wider regional synthesis and in-depth historical analysis. The historical account is of a long-term perspective that traces the developments from the pre-colonial population movements and state formation processes through the phase of imperial partition and differential colonial regimes to the impact of postcolonial politics within and between the modern states.

Kipré's West African focus replicates Zewde's Northeast African study in several of its essential details, notably a regional coverage and an articulated concern for time-depth in the treatment of the various events, including not just the more spectacular cases of 'collapsed' and collapsing states such as Liberia, Sierra Leone and the author's own beloved neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire, but, as well, the older instances of contestation of the 'national question' as are known to have occurred in Nigeria, Benin (formerly Dahomey), Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta), Ghana, Togo, Mali, Senegal, Guinea (Conakry) and Cape Verde. It is especially remarkable that in presenting his fascinating long-term historical account of the 'national question' as manifested in West Africa, Kipré has adopted the same colonially biased three-epoch chronological framework of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial distinctions as in Zewde's paper on Northeast Africa.

Obviously a most welcome extension of foundation comparative studies of the French and British colonial impact in West Africa already cited, Awasom's comparative focus on problems of 'Anglo-Saxonism and Gallicism in Nation-Building in Africa', has significantly advanced the discussions, in both Zewde's and Kipré's presentations, of the grave challenges that have been posed to past efforts in Africa to transcend national bounds and forge trans-border identities. The abysmal failure of the Senegambia Confederation experiment and the severely qualified success of the Cameroonian Union, in spite of the several interlocking bonds of shared history and culture of the local indigenous people along and across state boundaries, underscores the generally inadequately appreciated obstructions posed to regional integration efforts by the profound impact of the parallel national socialisation processes of the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Awasom presents the united Cameroon as a success story of a political merger that symbolises a triumph over backgrounds of a divided colonial experience. However, his own admission of the sustained political unease and even tension between the federalist Anglophone minority, now as if it were permanently relegated to a position of political subordination and second-fiddle roles vis-à-vis the centralist Francophone majority who dominate the government, would seem to suggest a justification of the reservations and ultimate rejection of the Senegambian confederation project by the Anglophone Gambian political elite whose position in the proposed confederation would have been more uncomfortable than the Anglophone minority's in bilingual Cameroon. The potentials of Awasom's contribution for a more regional, if not global level of comparison are many including not only the popular case of the Quebecois, the French-speaking enclave that has dictated the status of Canada also as a bilingual federation, but also the numerous other African cases of 'federation' and 'confederation' such as the short-

lived Senegal-Guinea-Mali and the equally brief Ethio-Eritrean Federation of 1952–1961 as well as the similarly failed attempts at federating Northern and Southern Rhodesia, today's Zambia and Zimbabwe, in the 1960s. These failed 'federation' and 'confederation' projects seem to point to regional integration on the model of the European Union or Economic Community as a more viable future for forging trans-border identity in Africa.

The last bracket of three papers, each cast in a large-scale inter-continental canvas of comparison, points to some of the typical strengths and weaknesses of such global-level comparative history, including the application to the study of Africa being sought in this special collection of essays. As has been elaborated by Jorgen Kocka and cited in the paper by David Lindenfeld on 'The Taipin [China/Asia] and the Aladura [Nigeria/Africa]: A Comparative Study of Charismatically Based Christian Movements', the shortcomings may be summarised to include: over-dependence 'on secondary literature, because the linguistic skills required for cross-cultural comparisons at the level of primary and archival sources exceed the abilities of most historians'; taking cases out of their ordinary spatial and temporal locations and contexts; and isolating otherwise interconnected events to permit their being meaningfully compared, an approach which, as we have already seen, runs foul of mainstream disciplinary doctrines; and, finally, the absence of causal interactions between the two or more social phenomena in focus, a matter of so much concern for regular historians. However, as Kocka is also known to have argued, these disadvantages of 'far-flung, decontextualized comparisons' are generally out-weighed by their greater benefits. These include a more enhanced heuristic value; more easily demonstrated relevance to 'a global age'; and, above all, the bridging of the gaps often created by common-place engagements with over-specialisation.

It is against this backdrop of the advantages and disadvantages of a global-level comparative focus on African history that we must appreciate the last three papers in this session by Lindenfeld, as already noted, on 'Charismatically Based Christian Movements', Olufunke Adeboye on the closely related issue of 'Pentecostal Challenges in Africa and Latin America: A Comparative Focus on Nigeria and Brazil', and Ayodeji Olukoju on 'Maritime Policy and Economic Development: A Comparison of Nigerian and Japanese Experiences Since the Second World War'. The papers by both Lindenfeld and Adeboye are particularly closely connected, not just in terms of their shared characteristics as 'far-flung, decontextualised comparisons' and typical dependence on secondary literature. The two presentations, focussed on issues of religion, point in the direction of original contributions to world history which, though 'the story of connections within the global human community', has hitherto tended to emphasise material aspects of the

‘connections’ (for example, ‘trade patterns’ and ‘technological diffusion’) at the expense of relatively intangible dimensions such as ideologies and religions.

By drawing on the extremely rich data in the monographic studies that have accumulated over the decades on the ‘Taipin’ in China and the ‘Aladura’ in Nigeria, Lindenfeld has successfully pulled off a refreshingly insightful piece on ‘Charismatically Based Christian Movements’ in Asia and Africa. There are evidently new things to learn as much by African specialists as by their Asian counterparts whose works have been imaginatively and creatively utilised to achieve an impressively distinct intercontinental synthesis and an exemplary attempt at a global-level ‘reciprocal comparison’ of both Africa and Asia. Adeboye’s presentation makes a similarly remarkable contribution to our global level understanding of the Pentecostal movement. Also, by drawing the data for her paper from a wide array of works that have been published over the years on the Nigerian and Brazilian Pentecostalism, she has accomplished a distinctly new global study that will be recognised as much by experts on Africa as by the specialists on Latin America, whose published studies have been rigorously researched for the purpose of a ‘reciprocal’ comparative focus on the religious aspect of African and Latin American history.

Olukoju’s descriptive essay on ‘Maritime Policy and Economic Development: A Comparison of Nigerian and Japanese Experiences since the Second World War’ follows the same general path as the other two preceding global-level comparative studies. Not only are there the same features of methodological and conceptual challenges evident in the total dependence on secondary sources, decontextualisation and observable causal disconnection between the two economies in focus, there are also manifestations of the characteristic advantages. By carefully harvesting the fruits of existing detailed studies of the maritime history of each of Nigeria and Japan, which have accumulated over the years (including the author’s own pioneering original work on Lagos), Olukoju’s paper has provided a pointer to the future of, to return to Pomeranz as quoted in Austin’s presentation, viable ‘reciprocal comparison’.

This important potential is especially evidenced in the concluding part of the paper in which the author poses and answers questions as to ‘equally why’, in spite of a common contemporary policy-making and actual huge state investments in maritime infrastructural development, the outcomes for Nigeria have been so significantly different than those for Japan, and vice versa. Locating the discussions within wider global comparative contexts was particularly facilitated as much by the ubiquitous fact of the significance and relevance of the maritime sector to modern world economy as by the advantage of a wider scope of available secondary literature on the subject.

The prospects of intercontinental and global-level comparison, attempted by Olukoju as well as by Adeboye and Lindenfeld, have been demonstrated by Mark Beissinger and Crawford Young in the admirable multi-disciplinary symposium on contemporary world history, titled *Beyond State Crisis? Post-colonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective* (2002).

On the whole, the nine papers presented to this symposium on 'African History in Comparative Perspective: New Approaches' would seem to have eminently fulfilled the purpose for organising it, namely to indicate the obvious gap in current engagement with research and teaching about African history, which a comparative focus and perspective can and must bridge. While the essentially theoretical and conceptual essays (notably the papers by Austin, Tymowski and Philips), draw attention to certain theoretical and methodological concerns, the remainder of the six largely descriptive essays (three by Zewde, Kipré and Awasom on issues of African regional interests and global implications; and three by Lindenfeld, Adeboye and Olukoju on inter-continental and global-level comparative casts) point in the direction of the immense potential for feasible themes and concrete case studies. All the presentations demonstrate the validity of the observation which Gareth Austin has made in his own specific contribution that 'the monographic foundation [of the twentieth century] is now [in the twenty-first] sufficient to facilitate defensible generalizations with Africa (or major regions of Africa) which can then be contributed to the debates about broader historical patterns'.

### Note

1. Austin's paper, 'Reciprocal Comparison and African History: Tackling Conceptual Euro-Centrism in the Study of Africa's Economic Past' presented at the Sydney Congress of CISH, is not included in this special issue of *Afrika Zamani*, but can be obtained in CISH-Sydney 2005 Proceedings-Guest Editor.

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