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The African Experience: From “Lucy” to Mandela

Course Guidebook

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Ken Vickery was born in Washington, DC, and raised in Virginia and Mississippi. He received his B.A. degree with Phi Beta Kappa honors at Duke University in 1970. He went on to study sub-Saharan African history at Yale University under the late South African historian Leonard Thompson. His dissertation, a study of the political economy of southern Zambia in the colonial period, involved both archival and extensive oral-historical fieldwork. Yale awarded him the Ph.D. degree in 1978.

Professor Vickery joined the history faculty at North Carolina State University in 1977, where he continues to teach and serves as the department's Director of Undergraduate Advising. He has been a visiting professor on several occasions at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and at Meredith College. In 1993, he was awarded a Fulbright teaching fellowship and spent the entire year of 1994 as Fulbright Visiting Associate Professor in the Department of Economic History of the University of Zimbabwe in Harare.

Dr. Vickery was inducted into the Academy of Outstanding Teachers at NC State in 1986. In 2005, he was named Alumni Distinguished Undergraduate Professor, the university's highest teaching honor.

Professor Vickery has continued to conduct research during his 11 journeys to Africa. His book *Black and White in Southern Zambia: The Tonga Plateau Economy and British Imperialism, 1890–1939* (1986) was a finalist for the Herskovits Prize, given annually by the African Studies Association for the outstanding book in African studies in any discipline. He has published numerous articles and reviews in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, *American Historical Review*, and other journals. In 2006, in honor of the anthropologist Elizabeth Colson, he edited and prepared a collection of 15 essays, *The Tonga-Speaking Peoples of Zambia and Zimbabwe*. Professor Vickery is also preparing a biography of Sir Roy Welensky, Prime Minister of the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland (1956–1963), set in the context of Southern African labor history.

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The African Experience: From “Lucy” to Mandela

Scope:

This course of 36 lectures is intended to provide a general introduction to Africa and its history. To many in the West, Africa has often seemed to be the Lost Continent—“lost” in two senses. The first would be *lost from view*: Many of us simply don’t hear much or know much about the place and its past. The second would be “lost” in the sense of *hopelessly lost*: What we do hear seems overwhelmingly negative, dominated by poverty, disease, disasters, violence, and tyranny. Our aim is certainly not to sugarcoat, explain away, or make excuses; there is enough reality behind these images to make doing so a genuine disservice. Our objective is to provide a fuller and more balanced view, a greater appreciation and understanding of the complexity of the African experience.

This course will focus primarily on Africa south of the Sahara Desert. This reflects the training, research interests, and teaching concentration of the instructor. Indeed, for related reasons, if there is a privileged subcontinent in the course’s coverage, it would be Southern Africa. The Republic of South Africa, in particular, features prominently, in part because it is by far the most developed and powerful country within our scope, but also because its history at many junctures yields fascinating comparisons with the history of North America. Nonetheless, we will devote plenty of attention to themes and developments centered in West, Central, and East Africa. Although the sequence of lectures is essentially chronological and based on dynamics unfolding in the whole continent or in a major subregion, at several points, we will devote a lecture to a specific country, such as Ethiopia, the Congo, or Zimbabwe, in addition to South Africa.

History is often described as drama; if true, it is played out on a stage. Our original stage comprises the many natural environments of the African continent. Following an introductory lecture, we begin our course with descriptions of the basic ecological zones of Africa, then sample some of the more spectacular specific places, such as Mt. Kilimanjaro and the Victoria Falls (one of the seven natural wonders of the world). We continue by considering African history in the truly long run. This, after all, is the so-called “cradle of mankind,” and we examine not only the evidence concerning human origins but the transformation of human society from hunting and gathering to agriculture and the Iron Age. We analyze the emergence of essential social categories related to kinship, ethnic identity

(what is a “tribe”?), and politics—the groundwork for African states and kingdoms.

We pause in Lecture Seven to mark an exception to our sub-Saharan focus by looking briefly at ancient Egypt and its connections to Africa further south, upstream on the Nile.

Lecture Eight surveys the enduring importance of religion—indigenous, as well as Islam and Christianity—and the following lecture provides an overview of the ancient outpost of Christianity, the Ethiopian kingdom. We then encounter some recurring themes of the course—statebuilding and the connection with long-distance trade—by exploring the “golden age” in the West African savanna, the rise of the Swahili city-states on the east coast, and the massive ruins of Great Zimbabwe in the south.

Some 500 years ago, global history reached a turning point, symbolized rather well by Columbus’s voyage. In Africa as elsewhere, from this point forward, relations with Western powers become increasingly relevant. Over a span of six lectures, we illustrate this by investigating two absolutely critical developments: West Africa’s long, deep, and tragic involvement in the Atlantic slave trade and the origins of modern South Africa, beginning with the Cape Colony in the 17th century and culminating in the discoveries of diamonds and gold in the late 19th.

By that point, Africa’s encounter with Europe reaches another crucial juncture. Important as the slave trade and proto-South Africa were, most of Africa retained its independence and was not colonized until the late 19th century. Then, in a very short space of time, it was—in fact, virtually the entire continent was carved up and added to one or another European empire. We look at the reasons for this sudden imposition, African resistance, and the commonalities and differences in various colonial systems.

By the mid-20th century, however, under intense pressure from African nationalists, the colonial edifice began to crumble nearly as fast as it had been built. But the paths to independence varied dramatically from colony to colony, especially between those that achieved decolonization peacefully and those where bloody liberation wars emerged. Nonetheless, with the final triumph of Nelson Mandela and his movement in South Africa, by the 1990s, colonialism and/or white minority rule were things of the past.

The drive to independence engendered great hopes and great expectations. After an initial period with genuine achievements, things began to turn sour—a bitter disappointment for so many. We analyze the factors—both internal and external—contributing to this downturn. We consider particularly appalling situations, to wit, the Rwanda genocide and the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Yet we observe as well not only the South African “miracle” but also a revival of democratic spirit in many corners of Africa. We conclude with an assessment of Africa at the start of the millennium, mixing sobering reality with some reasons for hope, however cautious.