Reading Du Bois on East Africa: Epistemological Implications of Apartheid Constructions of Knowledge

Jesse Benjamin
Kennesaw State University, jbenjam2@kennesaw.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/facpubs
Part of the Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation
Benjamin, Jesse, "Reading Du Bois on East Africa: Epistemological Implications of Apartheid Constructions of Knowledge" (2014). Faculty Publications. 4099.
http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/facpubs/4099

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.
Reading Du Bois on East Africa: 
Epistemological Implications of Apartheid Constructions of Knowledge

Jesse Benjamin 
Kennesaw State University

Abstract
This paper “reads” the scholarship of W. E. B. Du Bois and references East African history and historiography, including the broader pan-African tradition of which Du Bois was a leading member. Du Bois and his pan-African colleagues were often more accurate in their analyses and perception of biases and colonial myths than their Western counterparts. What is significant is that biases and myths that existed some fifty or more years before acknowledgement in the academy persist today, which raises important questions about the relationship between epistemology and identity, and between racial consciousness and the politics of academic production.

The Importance of East Africa in Rewriting World History

Scholars are beginning to restore W. E. B. Du Bois to his proper place in the annals of social science across numerous disciplines such as sociology, urban studies, Black studies, and criminology, which Du Bois helped to launch in the U.S. and throughout the world (Rabaka 2010). An area in need of considerable attention is Du Bois’ contributions to African history, and most notably absent is his work on East African history and sociology. This paper is an effort in that direction, and also seeks to briefly situate Du Bois’ work in the broader context of Pan-African thought, much of which “gets it right” both before and after Du Bois did and goes against the grain of the vast majority of colonial and “post”-colonial (or neo-colonial) Western scholarship that has a mixed track record at best. A more detailed critique of world system sociologists and other critical Western scholars in the area of East African history and identity is found in my earlier work (Benjamin, Nabateans and Nubians, East Africa and the World, The World and Africa), including components of my argument that are extrapolated from my dissertation (Benjamin 2002).

East Africa is one of the world’s most ancient crossroads of trade and culture exchange. Viewed from a Western vantage point, it is remarkable that Du Bois’ critical engagement in an area he admittedly spent little focus has stood the test of time and remains relevant even in current decades. This raises questions about epistemology, identity, and the politics of scholarship, some of which are addressed in the conclusion of this paper. East Africa often is overlooked in discussions of African history. This is, in part, because of its less direct or less known, but not insignificant, role in modernity’s trans-Atlantic chattel slave
trading system, and also because of its remoteness to current geographically located centers of global power. East Africa also is the seat of the very cultural complex we recognize as Neolithic civilization (language, writing, organized religion, domesticated agriculture and animals, urban settlements, monumental architecture, stratified society, and more), which emerged for the first time in world history more than twelve millennia ago in what is now the region of Sudan and Ethiopia. Since then, the adjacent coastal strip in which Swahili civilization emerged (long after the truly ancient land of Punt first named this area), and the trade routes spawned between this area and the vast interiors of the African continent on the one hand, and the wider Indian Ocean, the Pacific Rim, and the continent of Asia on the other hand, has kept East Africa at the cutting edge of human, cultural and economic development. Rewriting East African history, and reconnecting to this purposefully obscured past, is therefore an urgent task, and one that profound scholars like Du Bois never lost sight of, even during the height of colonial erasures, which is explained and disentangled below.

East Africa, like other parts of the former colonial world, endured a rewriting of its history to suit the political and ideological needs of its colonizers. However, even with formal decolonization in the 1960s and a spate of anti-colonial scholarship in the decades that followed, numerous assumptions and myths of the colonial era persisted, despite critical and Marxist scholarship emanating from the West. The corrective works of Du Bois and other Pan-African scholars' writing on East Africa are generally ignored or disregarded. They often were excluded from the segregated/apartheid academy during their careers and to this day continue to be erased in citations of colonial politics in most scholarly venues. Hence, this paper also is a contribution toward this still much-needed decolonization of knowledge. While many colonial myths have slowly been overturned in the unfolding of scientific inquiry and academic discourse, the presence of Pan-African perspectives upsets the linear unfolding of this process as a simple accumulation of knowledge over time. Specifically, numerous insights from recent years have suggested or explicitly laid out earlier works of Du Bois and some of his colleagues, and this has raised questions about the relationship between subjectivity and consciousness, or more simply between epistemology and the production of knowledge. A similar argument, in the broader context of Western thought generally, and with explicit reference to Du Bois, is seen in the powerful work of Maghan Keita (2000).

I use the term apartheid as a specific colonial referent to signify the global social schemas of racial segregation, inequality and exploitation, and overtly to underscore that such arrangements were neither limited to South Africa nor limited to juridical, political or land-ownership patterns, but instead were swept across cultural practices and institutions, including the academy. In the U.S. and throughout the West, the scholarly spaces of the formal academy and related institutions of higher education were explicitly, in some cases and de facto in other cases, segregated, and remain highly imbalanced on many levels (Benjamin 2002, Keita 2000, Rabaka 2010).

It is no shock that colonial lay scholars, early anthropologists and administrators brought racist and skewed assumptions with them to East Africa. These biases and mistakes continue to be present in contemporary scholarship and popular consciousness, especially in the work of noted scholars whom we have grown to respect. That these authors do not cite the literature of
Du Bois and his colleagues in the African diaspora raise questions about the ongoing apartheid nature of academic production, and what can be done to change this behavior if we wish to continue the work of decolonization at deeper levels.

**Colonial Myths of East African Historiography and their Pan-African Negation**

Some of the most glaring Eurocentric assumptions that pervade the historiography of East Africa have been overturned in recent years, but their vestiges can still be seen with close and critical readings. During the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, there has been wholesale importing of colonial historiographic assumptions by most Western scholars, progressive world-systems, and Marxist researchers. These include: (1) the assumption that the Portuguese Empire achieved immediate hegemony in the Indian Ocean after Vasco de Gama and his fleets arrived in the late 1490s; (2) that the entry of East Africa into the capitalist world system occurred only in the 1830s, with the rise of regional capitalist plantation slavery and slave trading; (3) the pervasive myth of Arab centrality and agency in East African coastal history, especially in East Africa's brief foray into the Atlantic-style chattel slave trade; (4) the concomitant diminishment of African agency in East African history that these mistakes imply; (5) the myth that Arabs and Arab culture overwhelmed African people and cultures they encountered, instantly displacing them whenever they arrived; (6) the widespread naturalization of modern and invented colonial identity categories, especially race and racism, in coastal society; and (7) the broad erasure of colonial agency in the 19th century that allows the focus to remain on Arabs and Omanis in this formative period, allowing the British (and Germany) to only appear in the 20th century largely as liberators.

The first five of these problematic assumptions have been largely overturned in regional scholarship; in almost every case the credit is not given to Du Bois or other Pan-African critics, but to scholars decades later who wrote without any reference to those who came before them. Myths 6 and 7 continue to exist in much of contemporary academic production, which is an argument I demonstrate extensively in several publications (Benjamin, East Africa and the World, Legacies of Race, Representation in Kenya, Katama Mkangi's Subaltern Sociology). These myths are often seen in the works of critical scholars such as Mazrui and Shariff (1994), and Willis (1993).

One could certainly focus on the significance of the exclusion of Pan-African scholarship from formal disciplinary discourses up to and including the present time. The debate surrounding Curtin's "ghettoization" comments, and subsequent discussions on Zeleza and his Noma Award speech about that same time provide good entry points (Zeleza 1993, Inikori 1996, Manning 1995, 1996, Martin 1996, Martin and West (eds.) 1999, Martin and West 1999), and Waite 1996). One could also focus on the connections between knowledge and power contained in this paper. My own theoretical framework is shaped especially by Fanon (1966) and Foucault (The Order of Things, The Archaeology of Knowledge) as well as by Said (1978) and Mudimbe (1988) for applications to "Orientalism" and "Africa" respectively. However, my focus is on the insights from Pan-African works that are of particular relevance to the project of reconstructing East African historiography. In so doing, I contribute to the debates on East Africa that continue to exclude African and African American scholarship, and the epistemological perspectives they provide. Ul-
timately, this re-evaluation of the historiography of East Africa is intended to contribute to an alternative genealogy of knowledge in this area, and to extend wider, planetary areas of thought.

A great body of work from within the African diaspora is available to scholars today and contains many important insights for scholars of African history. The question of subjectivity and the politics of location loom large in this discussion. This is because many scholars of African descent not only failed to buy into Eurocentric mythologies of African history and its outright denial, but also failed to argue for African presence in history and world relations. In doing so they actually contested, implicitly or explicitly, the entire Western epistemological edifice. A comprehensive review of this formidable body of literature is beyond the scope of this paper; instead, I focus first on one of Du Bois’ important questions for both the world and Africa, and East Africa in particular. I then briefly situate Du Bois in a broader Pan-African context, spanning before, during and after his contributions because these often marginalized scholars developed theories and/or empirical examinations of relevance to East African history and historiography.

Du Bois in Pan-African Context: Rewriting Africa and the Crisis of the West

Du Bois wrote against the hegemonic Western grain on Africa for the better part of the 20th century, starting with his 1896 thesis on the slave trade. A partial listing of his works, The Negro Problem, The African Roots of War, The Negro's Fatherland, Returning Soldiers, Pan-Africa, Manifesto, The Pan-African Congresses, Marxism and the Negro, Black Reconstruction, Whites in Africa, The World and Africa address issues of Africa in general, the European, Africa in world capitalist relations, and specific dynamics at particular political conjunctures, including African chattel slave trade. For example, at the very moment when formal “high” colonialism was being initiated throughout much of Africa towards the close of the First World War, Du Bois (The African Roots of War, The Negro’s Fatherland, Returning Soldiers, Pan-Africa, Manifesto) was already calling for its interruption and cessation, arguing within a broad historical context that included the slave trade and the Berlin Conference. In this paper I refer specifically to Du Bois’ groundbreaking systematic treatment of African history for a closer reading. Du Bois decided to devote an entire book-length study to the subject in The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which Africa has Played in World History. First published in 1946, and then revised and reissued in 1965, we see several chapters directly referencing the topic of East and Central Africa's relations with the rest of the world throughout history.

Du Bois first should be positioned within the broader context of Pan-African agitation and writings that went against the predominant Eurocentric grain of thought, which defiantly but logically addressed Africa as part of world history and its processes. This work appeared not only in scholarly and historiographic forms, but also in literature, as can be seen throughout the trans-Atlantic Harlem Renaissance, or within the Negritude movement in Paris, West Africa and the Caribbean. These perspectives may also be seen in the theoretical sociological works of Oliver Cromwell Cox (1948), and more systematically in the works of scholars such as C. L. R. James (A History of Pan-African Revolt, Revolution and the Negro, Imperialism in Africa, Stalinism and Negro History), or Cheikh Anta Diop (Pre-colonial Black Africa, The Cultural Unity of Black Africa, Civilization or Barbarism?).
Between the World Wars, scholars and activists from throughout the diaspora met in the colonial metropoles while pursuing education, work, and the formation of revolutionary organizations. There was a great proliferation of these organizations, often involving the same individuals, like the International African Friends of Ethiopia formed by C. L. R. James in 1935 to fight Mussolini's fascist invasion, and including prominent members George Padmore, Jomo Kenyatta, I. T. A. Wallace Johnson, Amy Ashwood Garvey, T. Ras Makonnen and Albert Marryshaw (James 1938, Kelley 1995: 10 and passim, Makonnen's 1973, Esedebe 1982, Von Eschen 1997).

Reading Du Bois' work on questions of Africa inevitably leads one to either conclude that he was profoundly brilliant before his time, or that the extent of the collective denial of such knowledge by White and/or Western establishment scholars was brazen and powerful. Perhaps both are true. The question remains: how could such important insights and perspectives have been ignored for so long and only now be making their way into mainstream thought, almost always without acknowledgement of Du Bois or other progenitors of an African perspective? In the introduction to the first edition, which was written and published at the close of the Second World War, Du Bois directly engaged these issues and what we now call 'standpoint politics' when he dedicated The World and Africa (1965 [orig. 1946]) as follows: “At any rate, here is a history of the world written from an African point of view, or better, a history of the Negro as part of the world which now lies about us in ruins,” (viii).

An excellent starting place then is the work of Cedric Robinson, particularly his Black Marxism (1983), which in chapter nine provides a masterful contextualization of Du Boisian historiography (see also Lewis 1993). In short, he links the rise of nation-states and their bourgeoisies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the creation of “founding myths” or national myths, which prop their elite in terms of justification and rationale. In a brilliant and early discussion of not only the American bourgeoisie’s founding myths, but also pre-revolutionary American myths of “the savage,” Robinson shows that Du Bois not only corrected the record, but challenged the structure of European cum world historiography itself. This goes a long way to explain why the man was vilified and so often ignored during his life time, particularly by the [White] academy (266-291). His epistemological renovations threatened the very architecture of Western society.

In Du Bois' The World and Africa, one sees from the outset that his project was marked by the context in which it was written—the close of World War Two, “the collapse of Europe” as an ideal, and a model of perfection. Du Bois was by no means alone in calling into question the relative and relational nature of “the Holocaust,” when he placed it (unlike most European commentators) within a long colonial context in which it did not seem aberrant at all, except in its direct impact for the first time inside Europe (at least on such a large scale), and against nominally “White” peoples [Jews, Gypsies, gays and lesbians, the disabled, the mentally ill] as the main targets of its violence. However, he was fairly unique [together perhaps with Cesaire] in using this moment to powerfully call for a reassessment of European epistemology and cultural hegemony itself. The West's myth of innate cultural superiority was perhaps never more exposed for the whole world to see its brutal contradictions on display in its own heartlands. Not only academics, but also many people at a popular level, primarily within colonized
populations, saw how Hitler and the Nazis were simply following the logics of the colonial world to their hideous extremes. Cesaire’s powerful extended statement (1955) is perhaps the most eloquent in this regard, while Zora Neale Hurston’s comments (1995) made during the early part of the war, was significantly poignant. The collection of James et. al. (1980) reveals the popular nature of this analysis in the Black community during World War II, while one sees similar arguments made in other colonial contexts (Churchill 1997).

Thus, Du Bois frames his rewriting of African and world history against this ‘crisis’ of European civilization beginning his first chapter in the following rhetorical manner:

We are face to face with the greatest tragedy that has ever overtaken the world. The collapse of Europe is to us the more astounding because of the boundless faith, which we have had in European civilization. We have long believed without argument or reflection that the cultural status of the people of Europe and of North America represent not only the best civilization which the world had ever known, but also a goal of human effort destined to go on from triumph to triumph until the perfect accomplishment was reached. Our present nervous breakdown, nameless fear, and often despair, comes from the sudden facing of this faith with calamity. (1965[1946]: 1)

Here we see Du Bois’ rhetorical and cultural stance revealed. He is arguing from within Western bourgeois assumptions [as indicated by his use of the pronoun “we”], in order to tear them asunder. Du Bois offers his revisionist work as a way of learning “lessons from history.” Europe’s practices had always been in contrast with its stated principles and self-image, and now its violence had occurred within Europe for the entire world to see. For Du Bois, the crisis of Europe was also a crisis of its historiographic narrative, its ideological and epistemological foundations. How could one not question bourgeois principles when its greatest exponent had committed such scientific and highly advanced genocides? In only one of the many recent insights into this holocaust, Edwin Black’s (2001) work shows how International Business Machines (IBM) played both sides in the conflict, illegally (and without later sanction) selling Germany cutting-edge punch-card computers without which the efficiency of its genocidal project would have been greatly diminished. However we put this European holocaust into perspective, it appears that greater attention to pan-African history might perhaps have allowed the prediction of the Holocaust, based on the logic of the capitalist world system of which it was a part.

In his powerful preface, Du Bois begins by openly confronting the epistemological regime of knowledge and power that denies African historicity, widening the perspective he had established in his earlier masterpiece Black Reconstruction (1935). This whole work, but especially its famous concluding chapter, “The Propaganda of History,” contains a veritable wealth of insight into the politics of history and representation, which can only be sampled here. In conclusion to this massive study of the Black role in the Civil War and Reconstruction, he states that there was much “more than mere omission and difference of emphasis” by White historians at such institutions as Columbia University and Johns Hopkins, and describes instead “a deliberate attempt so to change the facts of history,” so that history becomes “lies agreed upon” in the interest of history’s “protected beneficiaries.” His study “shows that with
sufficient general agreement and determination among the dominant classes, the truth of history,"—"a field devastated by passion and belief,"—"may be utterly distorted and contradicted and changed to any convenient fairy tale that the masters of men wish." This process—the colonizing and rewriting of history so necessary to the establishment and maintenance of power in the modern world—is very much at work in East Africa in precisely the same time period, so that one can clearly identify there the impact of global processes of slavery, imperialism and colonial historiography.

Building upon this earlier foundation, Du Bois suggests in The World and Africa a direct relationship between 'the calamity of Europe' and its erasure, and denial of Africa in world history (1965[1946]: 2). The book's opening words are very direct: "Since the rise of the sugar empire and the resultant cotton kingdom, there has been consistent effort to rationalize Negro slavery by omitting Africa from world history," (vii). It cannot be over emphasized that the tradition that Du Bois exemplifies here, concretely presages the knowledge/power nexus of Michel Foucault and later Edward Said. It is little accident that the academy rarely ties its intellectual genealogies to (anti-)colonial history rather than autochthonous European academic developments. See Wynter (1979) for a more powerful and early articulation of the need to trace our intellectual genealogies to not only non-hegemonic, but also 'popular' and countercultural traditions of resistance throughout the Atlantic world and beyond. In writing about the "integral role [of "Negroid peoples"] in human history from prehistoric to modern times," Du Bois bluntly acknowledges that he is writing against "authority," challenging "...Maspero, Sayce, Reissner, Breasted and hundreds of other men of highest respectability, who did not attack but studiously ignored the Negro on the Nile and in the world and talked as though Black folk were nonexistent and unimportant," (viii). His thesis was that "black Africans are men in the same sense as White European and yellow Asiatics, and that history can easily prove this..." (xii).

Further presaging contemporary notions of invented traditions and Foucaultian knowledge/power relations, he quotes Frobenius: "The idea of the 'barbarous Negro' is a European invention which has consequently prevailed in Europe until the beginning of this century" (79). Going further, Du Bois locates the erasure of African history as follows:

Who now were these Negroes on whom the world preyed for five hundred years? In defense of slavery and the slave trade, and for the up-building of capitalistic industry and imperialistic colonialism, Africa and the Negro have been read almost out of the bounds of humanity. They lost in modern thought their history and cultures. All that was human in Africa was deemed European or Asiatic. Africa was no integral part of the world because the world, which raped it, had to pretend that it had not harmed a man but a thing. In view of the present world catastrophe, I want to recall the history of Africa. I want to retell its story so far as distorted science has not concealed and lost it. I want to appeal to the past in order to explain the present... (79-80; italics added).

It is thus clear from the outset that for Du Bois the telling of history must engage the politics of knowledge, and a critique of a Western epistemology that has always been grounded in ideologies akin to slav-
ery and racism. It also is clear that Du Bois would have a very different reading of East Africa in world history than the world historians and scholars of the colonial West and its academic-industrial complex.

'Return to the Source': Ancient African Histories and the Politics of Engaged Scholarship

Like Chancellor Williams (1974) and A. G. Frank (A Theoretical Introduction, East and West, Reorient), writing some thirty to fifty years later respectively, Du Bois begins his treatment of Africa from an ancient perspective, with a chapter devoted to the period from 5000 B.C. to 2000 B.C. It should be noted that Frank (A Theoretical Introduction, East and West, Reorient), and Frank and Gills (1993), along with most other world systems theorists working to extend world history and world systems analysis backward to encompass two to five thousand years, all generally fail to sufficiently acknowledge Africa or the pioneering contributions of Pan-African scholars such as Du Bois and Williams in this regard (Benjamin 2006a). In subverting this trend, Du Bois anticipated several of the hypotheses of Martin Bernal (Black Athena I, Black Athena II), among which are the briefly stated suggestion that Fertile Crescent Neolithic civilization actually blossomed first in Sudan and Ethiopia and then spread by land and sea from the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean into the Persian Gulf, to ancient Sumeria, and then gradually around the Fertile Crescent along the route taken by the Bible's Abraham, eventually full circle back to Egypt. Thus, we might think of a Fertile Circle instead of a Fertile Crescent, if the African portion of this history is included. While archaeology in Ethiopia and Sudan has received less funding over the years, and has contended with numerous logistical challenges including wars, evidence from the work that has been done continues to confirm Du Bois' suggestions.

Unlike almost any contemporary scholars (see Zeleza 1993), Du Bois considers the kingdom of Kitwara, "the vaster empire of the Monomotapa, the kingdom of the Congo, and the various organizations of the Lunda people in the Congo valley..." (171), not only as historical entities, but as "Negro states." Even several decades after the fall of formal colonialism in most parts of the world, many Western scholars had difficulty considering ancient African polities as states or nation-states, preferring terms like tribes, kingdoms, chiefdoms, and so on. James de vere Allen (Shungwaya, Swahili Origins) was one important exception to this in the East African context, as was Walter Rodney in the broader African context as a whole (1972), and in the African diaspora in Latin America, in particular (1969). Du Bois, for his part, actually assumed that these states/polities were in cultural and economic contact across and along not only the Indian Ocean but also between the coasts and the interiors of Africa, to the west, the north, and the south. Here also, Du Bois anticipates the empirical work of Zeleza (1993) and Mamdani (2013), who sees the regions of Africa as connected internally by its various societies and civilizations, and the trade links between the Nile, the Congo Basin, the Saharan routes, the East coast and the southern reaches. Zeleza is one of the only scholars today to research this thread of inquiry and more needs to be done in numerous disciplines in this regard. Elsewhere (Benjamin East Africa and the World, The World and Africa), I have discussed the disappointing shortcomings of Abu-Lughod's otherwise magisterial work in this regard (Before European Hegemony, The World System), as well as that of other exemplary world systems scholars.
Contradistinctively, Du Bois speaks of “trade between Nupe in West Africa and Sofala on the East coast,” an idea only barely re-emerging or persisting in recent historiography. I have mentioned Zeleza’s recent revelations about transcontinental Central African trade routes connecting the East and West coasts as a rare but important modern intervention of this kind (1993), but this research acknowledges facts already in existence, but only occasionally recognized by certain creative or oppositional scholars like Diop (1991) or Miller (1969).

Du Bois also engaged trade ties between East Africa and Asia that were underway since before the Christian era, crediting (in somewhat of a U.S. projection) “mulatto and Negro merchants” with bringing “Central Africa into contact with Arabia, India, China, and Malaysia,” (191), and restoring African agency to Indian Ocean world history. Du Bois shared some of these observations and interpretations with fellow pan-Africanist scholars Chancellor Williams and Walter Rodney and detailed the close general association between one’s lived experience and one’s critical framework and perspective. Chancellor Williams was a few decades Du Bois’ junior, born in South Carolina to a father who had been enslaved in his early life. His lived experience during the Jim Crow Era, and his questioning of slavery and its legacies, led to his intellectualism and a career that spanned decades of research in Washington D.C. and forays into British and Ghanaian institutions of higher learning. Williams’ Magnum Opus, *The Destruction of Black Civilization* (1987), received proportionally inverse acclaim in the Black world and dismissal in the White academy; yet it steadfastly attempted to overturn pernicious biases and myths of the African past with great success in most of its passages.

Similarly, Walter Rodney, a child of colonized Guyana at the edge of South America and the Caribbean, turned his lived experiences of injustice and colonial separation into a lifetime of scholarship and commitment to his people and their liberation globally while he lived, taught and “grounded” in Jamaica, England, the U.S., and Tanzania before his fateful return to Guyana in the 1970s. His Magnum Opus, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), was deeply scholarly and explains why it has sold well on street corners as well as in university bookshops. Before his life was cut short by a politically sponsored assassin’s plot, he produced a strong and lasting body of critical scholarship as a highly trained but resolutely anti-colonial historian that continues to reverberate anxiety through the halls of supposedly objective academies. His defiantly engaged scholarship in the tradition of Du Bois and other anti-colonial, pan-African and radical scholars globally served as his impetus. In the hands of Du Bois, Williams, Rodney and others across these generations, knowledge and history served as weapons of liberation, empowerment, social change and social justice. As Keita (2000) and Rabaka (2010) argue, and I concur, there seems to be a strong correlation between lived experiences of racism and injustice, on the one hand, and critical epistemologies of scholarship that challenge the status quo and willingness to rethink accepted truisms, on the other.

**East Africa and the World: The Difference a Perspective Makes**

Continuing the focus on Du Bois’ *The World and Africa*, his chapter on “Asia in Africa” is of particular relevance to this paper as Du Bois looks systematically at the bi-directional flow between these continents, even if his title might problematically sug-
gest a more conventional and colonially normative unidirectional causality. The signficance of Du Bois' primary apprehension in Western discourses, "All that was human in Africa was deemed European or Asiatic," cannot be overstated. Using the limited available 19th and 20th century ethnological and historical studies, Du Bois managed to work against the grain in presenting a more balanced picture of East Africa in its historical relations with the Asian world and the Indian Ocean rim, and the latter's connections with events in the African interiors. Anticipating the work of renowned Howard scholar, Joseph Harris (The African Presence in Asia, The African Diaspora, Africa and Africans), Du Bois discusses at length the presence and role of Africans in Asia, particularly India, but also Persia, the Tigris River area, South East Asia, the Malay Peninsula and even Japan. Like Muhammad (1985) and Moreas Farias (1985) who extend the argument, Du Bois quotes Toynbee, Balfour, and numerous others to make the point that racial hierarchies, such as they existed in ancient Arabia and the Islamic world, were the reverse of modernity's White supremacist schema, and more often simply did not follow modernity's linear racial and hierarchical grid of being.

Not only did Du Bois turn the tables by examining the presence of Africa and Africans in Asia, but he also turned a skeptical eye on then-contemporary colonial claims that prominent peoples and cultures in Africa were in fact not African. Living and writing in the late nineteenth and more than the first half of the twentieth centuries, Du Bois confronted an earlier period of the discursive formation of colonial historiographies of African and world history. In this climate, encompassing the ending of slavery (1907 in Kenya, the 1920s in Somalia) and the incipient formation of the apartheid regimes that the modern West usually sees most clearly in South Africa, were also common in the U.S. South and in East Africa. Du Bois observed that many actors and particularly scholars were writing Africa out of history by equating the presence of Islam with the vague ethnic label 'Arabian':

It is then obvious that in Africa the term "Arab" is applied to any people professing Islam, however much race mixture has occurred, so that while the term has a cultural value it is of little ethnic significance and is often misleading. (1965[1946]: 184)

Across the years of the 20th Century most narratives of East African coastal history fail to heed Du Bois' wise observation, claiming that the ancient cities of the coast were Arab outposts (Abu-Lughod, Before European Hegemony, The World System; echoing the colonial/Western chorus), or Arab manors (Kirkman 1957), or that the stone dwellings dating to the eighth century and earlier were Arab designed, using Arab technology, and were Arab or Islamic owned and inhabited (Chittick, The Coast, India Relations, East Africa and the Orient). This Arabo-centrism, as well as the designation of all things cultural and historical within East Africa as either European or Arab-derived, are in fact 19th century rewritings of history linked with the hegemony of the Zanzibar-based Omani/British/Banyan slave trade from the 1830s to the 1880s reflected in the writing of most authors of the era, particularly proto-colonial officials, and about which a definitive historical examination remains to be undertaken.

This colonial bias was so pervasive that it permeated even the colonized societies themselves. Swahili scholar Ahmed Idha Salim (1975) has shown how, as late as the 1950s and 1960s, many coastal residents were themselves claiming Arab or Swahili cultural and political status within the colonial regime and societies of the coast in an
effort to distance and distinguish themselves from the lower-status, colonially-designated “African” majority of the population. Following independence, there was a massive reversal of this trend in naming, with an immediate and massive increase of “Africans” in subsequent censuses. However, the question of racial hierarchy is still very much at play in coastal society today, and Arab/Swahili Islamic as well as White colonial and expatriate elites still wield disproportionate racial power and status, together with elements of the state and other regional forces. The question of racial hierarchy remains as fluid, unstable and contested as it has been for the past two centuries when it first took firm hold in the early colonial-imperial context of British and French power. It must be said however, that unlike the colonial scholars and administrators who worked to undergird their White or racially privileged identities, the movement of Swahili identity described by Salim reflects not only racial predilection, but also a very strategic effort to mitigate harm and increase privilege and life chances under a [neo-colonial] racial state. Put another way, Swahili and settler colonial views on race in Kenya were formed and operated at very different levels within the power structure; so while they shared structural elements, they were also different in kind. Which is not to say that Swahili racism against Mijikenda or other African peoples was any less real or damaging, just that it was located differently and often somewhat less powerfully.

The analysis of discourses of race in Kenyan coastal society and the wider Swahili coast deserves much more attention, and has been briefly touched upon by scholars such as Constantin (1989), and less explicitly by Cooper (1980) and Glassman (1995). A parallel discussion of race that centers on issues of naming in the Black Atlantic Americas is discussed by Michael Hanchard (1990). An historically situated discussion of race and racial discourses at the Kenya coast is still sorely needed, having been skirted by both Western and Swahili nationalist scholars alike. Both of these groups are generally implicated to varying degrees in the privileged end of the racial continuum in question, as noted in my work, *Legacies of Race, Representation in Kenya, Katama Mkangi’s Subaltern Sociology.*

Also in the vein of Du Bois’ insight, David Sperling’s research (*Islamization, The Growth of Islam*) has shown that Islam on the Kenyan coast, while ensconced in at least portions of the urban coastal strip for several centuries in some areas, only spread inland in the nineteenth centuries and more so in the twentieth centuries with the rise of the capitalist slave trading and subsequent colonial economies. This counters claims to a widespread Islamic influence that have been discursively exaggerated in colonial literature, as well as in much of Swahili nationalist and even in much of the anti-colonial literature (Benjamin, *Representation in Kenya, Katama Mkangi’s Subaltern Sociology*). While most scholars assume that from their initial contact, Islamic sojourners to the East African coast occupied dominant positions, or even in the common formulation of settler-colonial fantasies that they were alone in a land without people (“pioneers”), Du Bois remains clear that the inverse was in fact true. Many coastal historians, colonial historians, and popular memories alike record that followers of Mohammed, even within the Prophet’s lifetime as well as numerous times thereafter, sought refuge in East Africa during internal conflicts as a safe haven they could retreat to and with which they presumably had some sort of pre-existing and favorable ongoing relations. Unfortunately, many narratives speak of an instant dominance, superiority, or ascension
to power by such visitors in the lands or
city-states they visited, but Du Bois re-
maind clear on this issue as well:

As autocratic power grew among the
Mohammedans, a number of religious
and political malcontents migrated
down the eastern coast of Africa. They
filtered through for a number of centu-
ries, not as conquerors, and they were
permitted to live and trade in limited
areas and mingled and intermarried
with the black Bantu. (190, italics my
own)

Du Bois' countervailing orientation to
these issues, based upon inverted racial-
epistemological assumptions to those of
the West, have been upheld in recent em-
pirical research although the matter is still
far from resolved. What is clear, however,
is that with Du Bois, well before the mo-
ment of formal decolonization, a very dif-
ferent interpretation emerged: one which is
proving closer to contemporary under-
standings than either the colonial or neo-
colonial scholarly traditions from which he
so steadily diverged, and which has yet to
be sufficiently incorporated into or cited in
most mainstream historical narratives,
even those which are corrective.

Contextualizing Du Bois, Past and
Present, as a Way of Conclusion
and Future Prescription

Du Bois did not emerge in a vacuum,
but was rather the product (and co-
producer) of a long tradition of scholars,
which included such early contemporaries
as Carter G. Woodson, Drusilla D. Hou-
ston, Claudia Jones, and John Jackson, the
mid-twentieth century scholars Cheikh
Anta Diop, Chancellor Williams, Walter
Rodney, and John Henrik Clarke, and nine-
teenth century predecessors such as Ed-
ward Wilmott Blyden, Ida B. Wells, Bishop
Henry McNeal Turner, and Alexander
Crummell. Given the general exclusion of
such scholars from academic and profes-
sional discourses during the past century
and longer, greater attention to the details
of their work, attempts to periodize and
historicize their contributions, and to con-
nect them with debates taking place else-
where and/or later, are still deeply neces-
sary. Pan-African scholarship written after
the life of Du Bois by writers such as Wal-
ter Rodney, Chancellor Williams, Cedric
Robinson, Joseph Inikori, Filomina Chioma
Steady, Ifi Amadiume, and Paul Tyiambe
Zaleza also deserves critical attention.

As Mudimbe (1988) described it, coloni-
alism "re-ordered Africa" at a fundamental
level. Ethnic groups and tribes were invent-
ed, or cemented and reified, and racial hier-
archies inserted and fomented (Mamdani
2013). At the coast of East Africa, this took
the form of a White/Arab/Swahili/Miji-
kenda hierarchy. The Swahili elites are nev-
evertheless marginalized within a modern
Kenyan society that places Kikuyu and oth-
er Highlands peoples in greatest control of
the nation-state and its resources. But at the
coast, the Swahili remain relatively privi-
leged, vis-à-vis others in the region, espe-
cially the Mijikenda, the Pokomo, and the Taita.
Thus, they predominate and dominate in
academic, political and cultural representa-
tions of the history and culture of the East
African coast, in a highly disproportionate
production of knowledge and discourse
(Benjamin, Legacies of Race, Representation in
Kenya). Colonial-era fissures therefore re-
main largely undisturbed in Kenya (Benja-
m 2013), as they do in much of the world,
and only anti-colonial or decolonial dis-
courses can challenge them. Pan-African
perspectives remain one of the best places to
look for such alternatives, and the scholar-
ship of Du Bois is a central place to start.
While East Africa was certainly at the mar-
gins of his monumental corpus of research, it remains a scandal that he is not cited in almost any of the critical texts produced in recent decades about the history and culture of the coast of East Africa. This is also true for most pan-African scholars, and speaks to the intensely divided and enduring apartheid structure of the academy.

The lived experience of racism and racial profiling made it difficult or impossible for Du Bois and other scholars of color to buy into most of the prevailing myths of academic discourse during their times, and this meant they were at the forefront of de-colonizing knowledge in East Africa, as they were in the rest of the world. Du Bois would probably be the first to tell you that membership in a racially discriminated group does not necessarily correlate with progressive politics or critical thinking. However, my research in East Africa reveals a strikingly skewed racial representation when it comes to critical apprehension of primary issues of historical interpretation, several significant exceptions (some mentioned above) notwithstanding. It is therefore worth further pursuing questions of epistemology and identity, and how they are related when it comes to the production of knowledge. Given East Africa’s importance to the long-durée histories of both the ancient and the modern world-systems of commerce and culture, re-centering this region to its rightful place of prominence has implications that are global and epistemological in nature. Not surprisingly, as I have attempted to show here, the scholar-activist par excellence W. E. B. Du Bois points the way.

Works Cited

Jesse Benjamin


—. (1979). Indian Relations with East Africa before the Arrival of the Portuguese. KIOS. Print.


Moreas Farias, P. F. de *Models of the World and Categorial Models: The ‘Enslavable Barbarian’ as a Mobile Classificatory La-


Wynter, S. *Sambos and Minstrels*. *Social Text* 1, Summer 1979. Print.