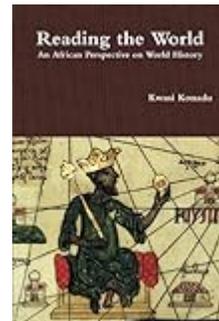




Kwasi Konadu. *Reading the World: An African Perspective on World History.* New York: Diasporic Africa Press, 2010. 303 S. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9660201-9-9.



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K. Konadu: Reading the World

The writing of world history provides something of a litmus for our changing understanding of both history and humanity. For much of human history, what we now think of as "origin myths" served as world histories. More recently, with the rise of the Western European power, narratives of "Western Civilization" and race came to dominate the world historical narrative, alleging that only a few people in the world (particularly White Europeans) had history, and that the rest of the world lived in a state of primitivism and tradition "unchanged unless they came into contact with the progressive energy of European peoples. Over the course of the 20th Century, however, this exclusionary version of World History came under assault from a variety of sources, ranging from non-White historians such as Carter G. Woodson and Cheikh Anta Diop, to fields such as Area Studies and ethnic studies, and from the development of the "New World History" which seeks to analyze connections, exchanges, and commonalities rather than distinctions, differences, and divisions. Indeed, most world historians would argue that the trajectory over the 20th and 21st Centuries has been towards an increasingly inclusive version of world history.

However, in *Reading the World*, Konadu offers a counterpoint to this progressivist notion of world history. In this wide-ranging, often insightful, and yet also frequently enigmatic text, Konadu does two main things. The first, at which he succeeds admirably, is a stinging critique of the failure of world history to break free from its Eurocentric and capitalist roots. The second, at which he is not quite so successful, is the provision of a narrative which offers an alternative vision of world history. Yet, despite the weaker points of his narrative (some of which will be identified shortly), Konadu nonetheless succeeds in raising a host of issues which can potentially inspire the sort of discourse and debate that are crucial to the ongoing creation of a truly world history.

As noted, Konadu's greatest strength is his critique of world history as it has been and largely continues to be written "by Europeans and those of European descent. Thus, while many Western-based scholars may congratulate themselves on their break with notions of world history that gave privilege of place to Western Civilization and notions of Whiteness, Konadu cogently points out that world history is still largely written by peoples

of European descent: "[...] these books[...] are largely written by Europeans or white historians who claim balanced coverage and a qualitative break from [western] civilization-disguised-as-world-history books" (p. 7). In particular, Konadu accurately identifies such pervasive notions as "civilization" and over-emphasis on national and other political boundaries as continuing conceptual flaws in the writing of world history. In this vein, he cogently points out that more world historians need to realize that culturally constructed boundaries are "... far more important than political ones" (p. 9)

Having largely completed his critique of world history as written to date in his first chapter, Konadu sets out on an even more difficult challenge, providing an alternative narrative of world history. This he does in four chapters, entitled "The Setting: Landscapes and Seascapes," "Encounters: World Together Worlds Apart," "Ruptures and Recreating Homelands Abroad," and "Contested Mosaic, Conflicted World." These chapters follow a roughly chronological narrative which examines major currents in world history via a largely regional analysis. In broad terms this narrative achieves Konadu's self-stated goal of providing "[...] but one of what should be a number of world history monographs representing an integral contribution from the historically marginalized in worldly historical knowledge and its production[...]" (p. 12). In particular, Konadu consistently provides a critique of how Eurocentric notions of historical significance and method have colored our understanding of a myriad of historical events and themes.

Konadu is clearly at his best when he offers critiques of the assumptions and shortfalls of our past and current systems of presenting world history. This reviewer, however, would have liked to see the author engage such notions as identity more effectively, for Konadu never really questions the existence of such broad identities as "Africanity" or "European-ness" as units of analysis. While these may be very real factors in modern history, their use to examine the deeper past is problematic. Thus, while Konadu is right to highlight the importance of cul-

tural units of analysis, it is important to notice that these units, too, are far from immutable over time and space.

It is at the more micro level of historical narrative and analysis, however, that Konadu's work falls prey to one of the most difficult aspects of doing world history - keeping it all straight and present the material clearly to one's intended audience. In particular, Konadu's narrative too often falls into a stream-of-consciousness style that throws chronology to the wind and assumes considerable knowledge on the part of his audience. For non-specialists this could be confusing or misleading, and even for those well versed in world history the seeming randomness with which events are often addressed can be dizzying. The discussion of African resistance to European conquest in the 19th and 20th centuries on pages 189 and 190 is a case in point. Konadu's attention to detail is also often less rigorous than it might be. For example, his statement "The Japanese attack of a U.S. fleet in Pearl Harbor (Hawaii) in 1941 led to a United States victory in the Pacific a year later, while European immigrants entered Australia in large numbers and both the United States and France continued[...] atomic bomb testing in the Marshall and Pacific islands during the 1940s." is not only a hodge-podge of topics but also rife with factual errors.

Concerns such as these, however, should not overly detract from what Konadu has achieved. Without a doubt, he has produced a highly significant perspective on global history, and one which makes great strides towards presenting a more complex and fascinating version of human history. Konadu is right that there will not be a true world history until it includes "[...] histories written by those who once were believed to be without history[...]" (p. 8). Indeed, while world history has made important strides towards producing a more inclusive history of humanity in terms of content, it is not until a more representative sample of humanity is authoring world history that the project will truly be inclusive in its endeavor.

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