

Thinking about the history of Africa in the eighteenth century

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It may at first sight appear rather strange to discuss thinking about African history in the eighteenth century in view of the general belief that Africa was a largely unknown continent which impinged on the consciousness of eighteenth-century Europeans mainly as the place from which slaves were taken to the Americas. It is largely absent from Enlightenment philosophical history and was of course famously excluded from history by Hegel¹. One might therefore be pardoned for supposing that there was no thinking about the history of Africa in the eighteenth century and so nothing to say on the subject. It should however first of all be pointed out that in this context Africa means sub-Saharan Africa, as North Africa (or Barbary) has generally been considered as a different case, and Hegel specifically excludes it from his remarks, aligning it with Europe or Asia. Indeed in the eighteenth century North Africa, most of which was part of the Ottoman Empire (albeit with a somewhat unclear status) was part of the known Mediterranean world and was the subject of regular political information in journals. Barbary was therefore to some extent not really part of Africa for much of the eighteenth century and its rich history, including that of its

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 99. Echoes of this view surfaced in France in 2008 following a speech by Nicolas Sarkozy.

church, was generally known – although by the time of its conquest by the French from 1830 onwards it had become part of savage Africa².

The rest of Africa was much more of a mystery. The coasts were visited, mainly since the fifteenth century, and as Philip Curtin observes, as far as the seaboard was concerned “a great deal was known [...] in ways that were intimate, detailed, and highly specialized”³. But Europeans were forbidden from venturing any distance into the interior and thus had to rely for information about most African countries on hearsay evidence, of which there was not a lot. Europeans frequently remarked that the slaves refused to say anything about their native country. This ignorance, and the fact that for most Europeans any contact with Africans was more likely to be with slaves, would seem to have encouraged a view of Africa as one vast undifferentiated mass peopled by savages with no history. The authors of *Modern Part of the University History* wrote in 1760:

One might reasonably expect to find, in such a vast extensive tract of land, and so great a variety of climates, nations, governments, a proportionable diversity of inhabitants, in regard to the qualifications both of body and mind, strength, corpulency, agility, industry, & dexterity on the one hand, & ingenuity, learning, arts & sciences on the other. Our readers, therefore, will doubtless be much surprised to find, in the contrary, a general uniformity run through all those various regions & people; so that, if any difference be found between any of them, it is only in the degrees of the same qualities, & more strange still, those of the worst kind; it being a common known proverb, that all people of the globe have some good as well as ill qualities, except the Africans.

They do however admit that this is the fault of these peoples’ governments, citing the great men, arts and commerce of the past (although this only seems to refer to North Africa), before continuing: “they are now everywhere degenerated into a brutish, ignorant, idle, treacherous, thievish, mistrustful & superstitious people, even in those empires & states where one might expect to find them more polished, humane, docile & industrious”⁴. The type of history that was apparently most appropriate in descriptions of Africa was natural history, and indeed there is no lack of descriptions of the flora and fauna, and of the appearance and customs of the people, of an ethnographical type. For the *Encyclopédie*, apart from ethnography, it is essentially African commerce that is noteworthy, as is clear from Diderot’s short article “Afrique”⁵. It is remarkable that in its introduction to the black Africans, the chapter of the *Universal History* cited above quotes the description provided by the Greek and Roman authors, and said to be still valid. According to this they are:

² See A. Thomson, *Barbary and Enlightenment* (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

³ P. D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa. British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850* (London: Macmillan, 1965), 9.

⁴ *Modern Part of an Universal History*, XIV (pt. 2) (London: T. Osborne, C. Hitch, A. Millar, John Rivington, S. Crowder, B. Law and Co, T. Longman, and C. Ware, 1760), 17. Curtin details the data available to eighteenth-century scholars in *The Image of Africa*, 18-22.

⁵ On the *Encyclopédie* see A. Curran, “Diderot and the *Encyclopédie*’s construction of the black African”, *SVEC*, 9 (2006): 35-53.

Proud, lazy, treacherous, thievish, hot & addicted to all kinds of lusts & most ready to promote them in others, as pimps, panders, incestuous, brutish & savage, cruel & revengeful, devourers of human flesh & quaffers of human blood, inconstant, base treacherous & cowardly; fond of & addicted to all sorts of superstition & witchcraft; & in a word to every vice that came in their way or within their reach⁶.

There would seem to be little more to say. As J. G. A. Pocock points out, for Gibbon Africa consists of Mediterranean Africa, not Sub-Saharan Africa, and he comments: “Racial prejudices played some part in excluding the latter from history, and the narratives he sought to follow did not include it”⁷. Indeed, at the beginning of his *Histoire de Loango, Kakongo et autres royaumes d’Afrique*, abbé Proyart writes unequivocally:

On ne doit point s’attendre que nous donnions une histoire bien étendue de peuples qui n’ont pas encore l’usage de l’écriture, et qui n’y suppléent par aucune espèce de monument: ensorte que cet ouvrage sera moins le récit de ce qui s’est passé chez eux, que le tableau de ce qui s’y passe aujourd’hui⁸.

The only reference to Africa in Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society* reflects the same view:

Great part of Africa has always been unknown; but the silence of fame, on the subject of its revolutions, is an argument, where no other proof can be found, of weakness in the genius of its people. The torrid zone, every where round the globe, however known to the geographer, has furnished few materials for history⁹.

And in a similar vein, the section on Africa in the *Histoire des Deux Indes*, which concerns its geography and customs (the only historical discussion being devoted to the Europeans’ slave trade), begins:

Les révolutions qui ont dû arriver dans l’Afrique occidentale, comme dans le reste du globe, sont entièrement ignorées; et il étoit impossible qu’il en fût autrement dans une région où l’écriture a toujours été inconnue. On n’y a même conservé aucune tradition qui puisse servir de base à des conjectures bien ou mal fondées¹⁰.

6 *Modern Part of an Universal History*, vol. XIV, 18.

7 J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 4. *Barbarians, Savages and Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 231 note 7.

8 Abbé Proyart, *Histoire de Loango, Kakongo et autres royaumes d’Afrique, Rédigée d’après les mémoires des préfets apostoliques de la mission française* (Paris: chez C.-P. Berton et N. Crapart, Lyon, chez Bruyset-Ponthus, 1776), 5.

9 *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* [1767] (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966), 110.

10 *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements des Européens dans les Deux-Indes* (Genève: Pellet, 1780), book XI, chapter 12, §1. This echoes Voltaire’s remark in *Essai sur les Mœurs* about the lack of history of peoples without writing, which includes Amerindians, Tartars and Celts.

The section is preceded by a long chapter discussing the reasons for the colour of the Africans' skin, a subject of huge scientific curiosity with obvious implications for the question of slavery, and one on which opinion was divided. Indeed the explanation given in the third edition of Raynal's work, quoted here, is different from that given in the earlier ones¹¹. Above all, this discussion places the Africans firmly in the realm of natural history, one where they remained as scientific interest fuelled physical anthropology and the racial classifications that developed seriously from the 1770s.

Curiously, however, the scientific discussion in Raynal's work leads on to a passage by Diderot on the uncertainty of human knowledge and the lack of serious study, hampered by religion, which ends with the prediction that the age of natural history is coming to an end, to be replaced by the study of history:

Le goût de l'histoire naturelle est sur son déclin. Nous sommes tout entiers aux questions du gouvernement, de législation, de morale, de politique et de commerce. S'il m'étoit permis de hasarder une prédiction, j'annoncerois qu'incessamment les esprits se tourneront du côté de l'histoire, carrière immense où la philosophie n'a pas encore mis le pied¹².

While it is true that Diderot's fragments seem sometimes to have been inserted in the text in a way which did not necessarily take account of the general thrust of the argument, nevertheless one cannot fail to be struck by the fact that this statement of the importance of historical study introduces, so to speak, the presentation of Guinea. Whether one should read too much into it or not, this juxtaposition does seem to invite further investigation. And despite the apparently unambiguous opinions quoted above, when one looks in more detail at what was in fact written about Africa in the eighteenth century, a much more complex picture emerges. There are many accounts of different peoples and nations divided up into empires, kingdoms and even republics, with different political and legal systems and religions, who cultivate crops, fight wars, make treaties, trade and so on. In short, these descriptions treat the African continent little differently from other continents, despite the conclusion of the physiocrat abbé Roubaud:

L'histoire de cette contrée est celle de la barbarie et du brigandage, et sa description celle d'un désert peuplé de bêtes féroces et d'animaux farouches¹³.

11 On these questions, see Ann Thomson: "Issues at stake in eighteenth-century racial classification", *Studi Settecenteschi*, 21 (2001): 223-44 and "Diderot, Roubaud et l'esclavage", *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie*, 35 (2003): 70-76.

12 *Histoire des Deux Indes*, book XI, chapter 10, §20. Pocock quotes the whole of this diatribe (*Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 4, 303-4), but his interpretation is different from mine.

13 *Histoire générale de l'Asie, de l'Afrique et de l'Amérique* (Paris: Des Ventes de la Doué, 1770-1775), vol.12 (1771), 578.

There is also a certain amount of history, much of it dating of course from the arrival of the Europeans and drawn from European accounts, but some going back earlier. The writings thus belie the general perception of the whole continent as an undifferentiated and above all unchanging place of undiluted savagery. The *Universal History*, whose disparaging introduction to Africa we have quoted, in fact devotes four whole octavo volumes to the continent and the history of its different countries, drawing on existing accounts. It begins with Abyssinia which was often seen as a special case¹⁴, being the home of the Queen of Sheba whose visit to King Solomon was said to have led her to introduce Judaism not only to that country,

but in many other parts of Africa, though perhaps formerly subject to that crown, but since dismembered from it, and sunk in other respects into the grossest idolatry, as seems to confirm that report, founded on an ancient Abyssinian record, of which we shall speak in its proper place, which makes express mention of it¹⁵.

But Abyssinia is not in fact presented here as an exception as other regions are described in a similar way; the authors make a general distinction between people in the inland regions and those living on the coast who are “long since allured to more active and laborious life”, although their civilization is attributed to their “frequent commerce with Europeans and other strangers”¹⁶. Those who seem to constitute the exception are on the contrary the Hottentots, generally the object of very negative descriptions. The *Universal History* describes these inhabitants of “Caffraria” as “but one remove from brutes, who live like them without religion or laws, void of reason, humanity and industry and subsist altogether upon plunder and hunting”¹⁷. In 1778 the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* called them “the most degenerate of all the human species”¹⁸. For the rest, however, each of the states is described and its origin and revolutions indicated and some accounts refer to African tradition, giving the lie to the claims that there could be no history without writing, although of course these accounts could be considered as fables and thus unreliable¹⁹. Even the terrifyingly savage and bloodthirsty Giagas are accorded a history²⁰. One of the books drawn upon by the authors of the *Universal*

14 De Jaucourt’s *Encyclopédie* article “Ethiopie” indeed discusses its history.

15 *Modern Part of an Universal History*, vol. XIV, 22; in vol. XVI, 197 there is a reference to Angolan tradition.

16 *Modern Part of an Universal History*, vol. XIV, 32.

17 *Modern Part of an Universal History*, vol. XIV, 21.

18 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2nd ed., I (Edinburgh: J. Balfour & Co, W. Gordon, J. Bell, J. Dickson, C. Elliot, W. Creech, J. McCliesh, A. Bell, W. Hutton, and C. Macfarquhar, 1778), 111.

19 On which see Voltaire’s article “Histoire” in the *Encyclopédie*, vol. 8 (Neuchâtel: Samuel Faulche, 1765), 224.

20 The Appendix to the history of W. Ethiopia in Book XVI gives an “Account of the dreadful incursions of a new tribe of Giagas into the kingdoms of Kongo, Loango etc., thence, through the heart of Africa, quite to the Eastern Coast”.

History was Francis Moore's *Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa* (1738) whose scope is much wider than its title indicates. Moore, who was a factor for the Royal African Company in the Gambia, used the oldest accounts he could find, in particular that by Leo Africanus, to give an idea of the history of the region. Although his history is somewhat fanciful, beginning with the Golden Age in Africa before the arrival of the Moslems, it is clear that for Moore the Africans entered history at least at that date because with the expulsion of the Moorish conquerors in the fourteenth century they did not return to "their first simplicity of manners"²¹.

It would be fastidious to go at any length into the accounts of different African kingdoms, empires etc. (but not 'tribes'). While there are always a lot of details about their customs and religion and there is no lack of depreciation and emphasis on tyranny, wars, absence of arts, and ignorance, there is in the literature a certain amount of history of the various countries, often highlighting changes in frontiers, the break-up of kingdoms, wars and invasions. To give but one example, the long article on Angola in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is largely devoted to the country's history; while much concerns the famous Queen Zingha, who particularly captured European imaginations²², an earlier "petty African tyrant", Ngola Chilivangi, is compared to Alexander the Great when the "folly and insolence" brought on by his conquests led him to believe he was a god²³. It is clear that, the peremptory statements I have quoted notwithstanding, for most of the writers on Africa – including those who had been to the West coast for the purposes of the slave trade – it was not a continent without a history. It was not, despite the statement at the beginning of Book 14 of the *Universal History*, radically different from the rest of the world even if it was rarely seen as congenial.

But does this mean it was possible to think about African history in the eighteenth century? It was clearly possible to think about the history of North Africa, which fitted into the account of world history to the extent that it was part of first the Roman and then the Moslem empires, but the rest of Africa was certainly more problematic. It is the "half of Africa" that is, according to Voltaire, plunged into a brutal lethargy²⁴. For John Millar the Africans are clearly rude peoples at an early stage of the development of mankind, before the appearance of private property; to illustrate this stage in history he provides examples concerning the Hottentots and the Kingdoms of Kongo, Loango, Benin or Guinea, mostly taken from abbé Prévost's *Histoire générale des voyages*. The image he provides is generally not a very positive one; the position of women in the Congo is unenviable and the power of a father over his children "on the coast of Africa" is said to be so great that, "as is too well known to be denied [...]"

21 *Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa, containing a Description of the several Nations for the Space of Six hundred Miles up the river Gambia [...]* (London: Edward Cave, 1738), iii-v.

22 See Jean-Louis Castillon, *Zingha, reine d'Angola, histoire africaine* (Paris: Lacombe, 1769).

23 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2nd ed., vol. I, 429.

24 "Histoire", in *Encyclopédie*, vol. 8 (1765), 221.

in order to supply the European market, he often disposes of his own children for slaves". Millar does however also note that the same kingdom of Congo

is divided into many large districts or provinces, the inhabitants of which appear to have made some progress in agriculture. Each of these districts comprehends a multitude of small lordships, which are said to have been formerly independent, but which are now united together, and reduced under a single chief governor, who exercises absolute authority over them [...].

He expounds on the absolute power of this king, providing a description which corresponds to the main characteristics of despotism, adding "similar accounts are given of the constitution in the neighbouring kingdoms of Angola, Loango, and Benin"²⁵. Here, therefore, these states appear to be at a somewhat later stage of development and indeed to possess a history. For Lord Kames too the Africans are not all "rude" peoples. He writes for example:

the negroes of the kingdom of Ardrah, in Guinea, have made great advances in arts. Their towns, for the most part, are fortified, and connected by great roads, kept in good repair. Deep canals from river to river are commonly filled with canoes, for pleasure some, and many for business.

This is followed by a list of agricultural produce and a description of the extraction of salt which is traded in inland countries for gold²⁶. What we have here, as in many of the descriptions of particular empires and kingdoms, is a picture of thriving if despotic kingdoms, hardly primitive savages at the first stage of human history. Indeed, the category of despotism itself is not appropriate to savages (although it may be to barbarians) and can often correspond to a state which has degenerated from monarchy, a situation implied in one of the quotations from the *Universal History* given at the beginning. Likewise the awareness that Abyssinia is Christian (although professing a "degenerate" form of Christianity) and that several of the more northern countries of sub-Saharan Africa are Moslem again made it difficult to classify them as being at the earliest stage of history. There seems to be a contradiction between the generalisations concerning the savagery, ignorance and general primitiveness of Africans, corresponding to a view of sub-Saharan Africa as "one rude chaos"²⁷ on the one hand, and the picture that emerges from the more detailed accounts of different countries on the other, however negative they may have been. According to the *Universal History*, the history of Africa "has unfortunately been treated by

²⁵ *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, [1771] ed. A. Garrett (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006), 8-9, 166, 224-5.

²⁶ H. Home, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, [1774] ed. J. A. Harris (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007), Book I, 101.

²⁷ The title of the chapter on Africa in J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind* (London: Dent, 1982), which provides many more examples.

writers the most illiterate, unmethodical, credulous, and false, of any we have hitherto had occasion to peruse”²⁸. This, together with the generalisations placing the Africans in the category of savages, probably prevented any real interest in or discussions of what was in fact a relatively large body of known facts concerning African history.

Nevertheless the awareness of the existence of this history and the information generally known about the peoples on the coasts of Africa with whom the Europeans were in contact meant that to place the Africans in the category of simple savages in the earliest stage of human development led to a certain number of problems. This may be the reason for the lack of references to Africa in most speculative history. The other complicating factor was also surely the existence of the slave trade. As was explained in all the writing on West Africa, the slaves were sold by the Africans themselves, and accounts by slave traders demonstrated that it was a complicated trade with strict rules in which court had to be paid and presents made to powerful rulers for whom the local traders acted as middlemen. Such trading activity would also seem to remove the Africans from the category of savages. What is more in the African case, far from bringing civilisation, trade had apparently mostly accentuated savage behaviour and wars and thus flew in the face of the prevailing belief in the civilising effect of commerce. African history was an anomaly and the primary reason for this anomaly and for the difficulty of thinking about African history seems to have been the slave trade.

Most of the known history of sub-Saharan Africa concerned the period since the arrival of the Portuguese, even when it did not recount the activities of the Europeans in Africa, and it was therefore intimately linked with slave trading. It was as a result very difficult for the Europeans to separate the two. While, as we have seen, for some authors Africans had been civilised by contact with the Europeans, for others the evils of Africa came from the activities of European slavers. This was increasingly the position of the abolitionists whose impact came to be felt from the 1770s. If we look at the pioneering abolitionist works written by the American Quaker Anthony Benezet, which were widely circulated and translated, we can see that his account of the parts of Africa where the slaves were acquired attempts to counter the image of these regions propagated by the defenders of the slave trade as dominated by bloodthirsty savages from whom slavery had, so to speak, saved the slaves. He uses some of the same sources as does the *Universal History* to emphasize the agricultural production and trade of certain countries on the slave coast before the arrival of the Europeans, and insists that the Africans do not live “in the same wild unsettled manner as the American Indians do” and thus can become “good members of society”; as the region is huge and includes many different peoples,

28 Vol. XVII, 445.

there is doubtless some people of a more savage disposition than others, yet certain it is, that the natural disposition of the generality of the negroes is widely different from the roving dispositions of our Indians; they generally settle together and employ themselves in agriculture and commerce. Some large nations are represented as industrious and careful in the cultivation of their lands; breeding cattle, and carrying on a trade to distant parts²⁹.

It is interesting to note in passing that a similar point was also made by someone as different from Benezet as Pierre-Victor Malouet, who was a French colonial administrator and defended the need for the slave trade. In a manuscript “Mémoire” concerning his mission to Guyana in 1776 he opposes the savagery of the Americas to the ancient civilisation of the old world, writing: “au milieu même des déserts de l’Afrique, de magnifiques ruines attestent qu’il y eut là une immense population, des arts, des richesses, des maîtres et des esclaves; ailleurs on découvre des cités dans les entrailles de la terre”³⁰. For these writers it is a mistake to place the Africans in the same state of nature as the Amerindians. Nevertheless, despite all this awareness of the Africans’ past, it is the view of them as innocent and primitive children of nature that seems to predominate in abolitionist writings. Benezet’s work begins by insisting at length that the wars in Africa are encouraged by the Europeans in order to ensure a source of slaves and that the Africans are naturally good. He quotes Michel Adanson’s *Histoire naturelle du Sénégal*: “The simplicity of the natives, their dress and manners, revived in my mind the idea of our first parents; and I seemed to contemplate the world in its primitive state”; various other passages taken from Adanson, Bosman, Smith, Barbot, Brue and others likewise insist on their good nature and the progress they could make if “their genius was cultivated”³¹. Such remarks are typical of much abolitionist literature, whose effect is to paint a picture of the Africans as, if not actually living in a state of nature³², at least the simple, childish victims of European wickedness who can be civilised if well-treated – and probably converted to Christianity. John Wesley, after quoting details about various West African countries provided in the main by participants in the slave trade, concludes:

Upon the whole, therefore, the Negroes who inhabit the coast of Africa, from the river Senegal to the southern bounds of Angola, are so far from being the stupid, senseless, brutish, lazy barbarians, the fierce, cruel, perfidious savages they have been described, that, on the contrary, they are represented, by them who have no motive to flatter them, as remarkably sensible, considering the few advantages

29 A. Benezet, *A Short Account of that Part of Africa inhabited by the Negroes* [...], 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: W.Dunlap, 1762), 72.

30 *Mémoires de Malouet*, 2nd ed., I (Paris: Plon, 1874), 97. He was probably thinking of North Africa.

31 Benezet, *A Short Account*, 13 f.

32 Such as William Roscoe’s *The Wrongs of Africa, a Poem* (1787), 9, describing them as “strangers alike to luxury and toil” (quoted by Curtin, 61).

they have for improving their understanding; as industrious to the highest degree, perhaps more so than any other natives of so warm a climate; as fair, just, and honest in all their dealings, unless where white men have taught them to be otherwise; and as far more mild, friendly, and kind to strangers, than any of our forefathers were³³.

If not quite noble savages, they are at least good barbarians; in any case, they are at the stage of development of “our forefathers”. Others who were vaguer about the Africans’ stage of development clearly believed it was below that of the Europeans. For Benjamin-Sigismond Frossard, writing at the beginning of the Revolution:

Nous verrons que, malgré le long commerce qu’ils ont eu avec les plus méchants des Européens, ils ont conservé une partie de leur simplicité primitive; et que s’ils n’étoient pas excités à la vengeance par les fréquentes injustices que nous leur faisons, ils se montreroient aussi affables, aussi humains qu’aucun peuple de l’Europe. A ces avantages, qu’on ajoute un esprit susceptible de perfection, l’exercice des arts utiles, un gouvernement généralement modéré; et l’on aura peu de peine à se persuader que les Nègres auroient vécu heureux, s’ils étoient demeurés inconnus à l’Europe, ou si, loin de nous attribuer injustement le droit de les asservir, nous nous étions fait un devoir d’éclairer leur entendement en accélérant leurs progrès dans la civilisation, et leur raison, en réfléchissant sur eux la lumière Divine dont la Providence nous a favorisés³⁴.

He concludes that Guinea, although barbarian, has nevertheless made considerable progress towards civilisation even if these nations are retarded compared to Europeans. At the same time, they retain the superior virtues of the first ages of history (188-189). In his attempts to counter the negative stereotypes recounted by the defenders of the slave trade, this abolitionist further muddies the waters. A similar confusion is found even among some of those who were favourable towards the slave trade. Golbéry, who defended French interests in Senegal in the 1780s and whose descriptions of these people concern mainly their physique, also speculates on the history of Africa, in particular the influence or past migrations of the Ethiopians or even Indians, traces of whose culture are found among the peoples of West Africa. In many ways his attitude is similar to that of the abolitionists we have seen, despite his contempt for that “sect” and their dangerous theories; he believes in the duty of the Europeans to civilise these mainly savage peoples who are close to a state of nature, but he nevertheless describes the Wolofs (whom he calls “iolofs”), as people among whom “il existe déjà un commencement de civilisation, un certain ordre, et même des réglemens de police; dont le caractère est généralement honnête et bon; chez qui l’hospitalité est une vertu naturelle”³⁵.

33 “Thoughts upon slavery”, 1774, in *The Works of John Wesley* ed. T. Jackson, XI (1872), 59-79 (<http://gbgmumc.org/umw/wesley/thoughtsuponlavery.stm>).

34 Frossard, *La Cause des esclaves nègres et des habitans de la Guinée portée au Tribunal de la Justice, de la Religion, de la Politique*, I (Lyon: Aimé de la Roche, 1789), 142.

35 Silvain Meinrad Xavier Golbéry, *Fragmens d’un voyage en Afrique [...]*, 2 (Paris: Truttel et Würtz, 1802), 107.

An indication of a connection between abolitionist sentiment and the way that Africa and its history were perceived can be found in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and its succeeding editions. In the first edition, published in Edinburgh in 1771, there is a short article on Africa which is limited to factual geographical information, together with the remark: "The government in Africa is in general despotic, and the inhabitants black"³⁶. There are also even shorter articles on particular parts of Africa. However, in the second edition in 1778 the article on Africa is greatly extended and remarks are added to the geographical description generally emphasizing the savagery of the continent, particularly the inhabitants of the southern part as we have already seen. Otherwise, the Europeans' ignorance about Africa is emphasized:

In short, Africa, though a full quarter of the globe, stored with an inexhaustible treasure, and capable of producing almost every necessity, conveniency, and luxury of life, within itself, seems to be utterly neglected both by its own inhabitants and all other nations: the former, being in a savage state, are incapable of enjoying the blessings offered them by nature; and the latter taking no farther notice of the inhabitants, or their land, than to obtain at the easiest rate what they procure with as little trouble as possible, or to carry them off for slaves to their plantations in America³⁷.

This reference to slavery is developed later in the article, but in a curious way. The discussion of slavery, while rejecting the justification which used the Biblical account of the curse of Ham, condemns the "iniquitous trade" in a perfunctory manner, and instead insists on the Africans' liberty. After observing, "Certain it is, that the interior parts of Africa have never been conquered by any nation", the authors remark that while the rest of the world was governed by "a set of lawless banditti",

during this time the Africans enjoyed liberty, and do still enjoy it, notwithstanding the wicked advantages the Europeans take of the barbarism of the negroes to make them sell one another. No European nation hath ever made a nation of negroes yield up their country to them, or pay them an annual tribute; nor have they even been able to introduce their customs among them; so that, on the whole, instead of being the greatest slaves, we cannot help thinking the barbarous nations in Africa are the only people on earth that have never been enslaved by others³⁸.

The condemnation of slavery is therefore less striking than the vision of Africa as composed of independent barbarous peoples. However, in the third edition of the *Encyclopaedia* in 1797, the emphasis again changes. The derogatory statement about the Hottentots quoted earlier disappears and remarks are added about the system of government, said to be monarchical everywhere. It concludes:

36 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, I (Edinburgh: A. Bell and C. Macfarquhar, 1771), 36.

37 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2nd ed., I (1778), 110.

38 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2nd ed., I (1778), 111.

Few princes, however, possess a very extensive jurisdiction; for as the natives of this part of Africa are grossly ignorant in all of the arts of utility or refinement, they are little acquainted with one another; and generally united in small societies, each governed by its own prince³⁹.

This emphasis on their primitive state of society is accompanied by a much more virulent condemnation of the slave trade with which the article ends:

There are some independent princes who have extensive dominions; particularly the kings of Dahome and Widah, the most noted of any for the infamous slave-trade. Upwards of 200 years have the European nations traded with Africa in human flesh; and encouraged in the Negro countries, wars, rapine, desolation, and murder, that the West India islands might be supplied with that commodity. The annual exportation of poor creatures from Africa for slaves hath exceeded 100,000; numbers of whom are driven down like sheep, perhaps 1000 miles from the sea-coast, who are generally inhabitants of villages that have been surrounded in the night by armed forces, and carried off to be sold to our traders (227-228).

The British are also criticized for not attempting to convert the slaves to Christianity, unlike other Europeans. This description, together with the removal of the passage concerning the Africans' independence, has the effect of representing the Africans as victims of both the Europeans and their own despotic kings at the same time as they tend to be seen as childlike children of nature. This provides a further indication that the abolitionists' attempts to counter pro-slavery propaganda meant that the image of a passive, victimized Africa seems to have increasingly accompanied the condemnation of the slave trade.

Within the scope of a brief article it is impossible to develop this point any further, but what I would like to suggest as a result of this rather rapid survey is that Africa presented a problem when it came to thinking about its history in the eighteenth century. The difficulty of travelling any distance into the interior encouraged unreliable speculation about most of the countries of the continent, but there was nevertheless a certain amount of information available about the history of many African states, detailed at length in the *Universal History*. Nevertheless, the tendency to see Africans as savages and the efforts of the abolitionists to render the European slavers responsible for Africa's problems combined to encourage a general perception of them as childlike peoples at the dawn of history. But unlike the Amerindians, condemned to occupy the role of savages, good or bad, the Africans could apparently not be assigned a clear place in the stadial scheme of history in view of the conflicting evidence about their degree of civilisation. Thus, I would argue, they were generally excluded from thinking about history, while at the same time their own history was ignored or simply denied. Indeed, the abolitionists' insistence that their wars were simply the result of machiavellian manoeuvring on the

39 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 3rd ed. I (Edinburgh: A. Bell and C. Macfarquhar, 1797), 227.

part of European traders made it impossible to place them in any coherent historical narrative or to accord these peoples and states a political history of their own. Their place seems to have become that of childlike victims to be either enslaved or, increasingly, converted and civilised by the Europeans rather than actors in their own destiny. Thinking about the Africans was increasingly confined to the field of natural history and anthropology and to their place in the racial hierarchy.