EXPLORE GLOBAL ISSUES IN A REGIONAL CONTEXT: 

AFRICA

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Did you know that South Sudan became the newest sovereign state in July 2011? That the first environmentalist to win the Nobel Peace Prize was an African woman? That Africans have been trading with people from distant continents for centuries?

There is so much to learn about this diverse continent. The resources that are offered by the African Studies Program (ASP) at Indiana University can help you begin to explore it.

The ASP brings together experts and educational resources on Africa's diverse regions and countries including: Algeria, Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda, and South Africa. Many of these countries are prominent in the news today: Liberia, whose president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, is the first female president on the continent and recent Nobel prize winner; oil-rich nations like Nigeria; and, of course, South Africa, which hosted the 2010 World Cup. And all of Africa’s countries offer diverse peoples and cultures which you can explore.

A range of current issues from across the region are featured on the following pages, which demonstrate the importance of the African continent and some of the major challenges it faces.
LEARNING OUTCOMES: 10 THINGS STUDENTS SHOULD LEARN ABOUT AFRICA

1. **Africa is not a country.** It is the world’s second largest continent and consists of 55 politically sovereign, and culturally and linguistically diverse, states. The continent’s billion people speak nearly 2000 languages and practice various indigenous religious traditions as well as Islam and Christianity.

2. **Africa was home to the earliest humans.** Researchers have found what are believed to be the 4.4 million years old remains of the first humans in Ethiopia.

3. **Ancient kingdoms existed across the continent well before European contact.** While the Egyptians are the most famous, highly sophisticated kingdoms and vast centralized states developed in Southern, Northeast, and West Africa. They include ancient Zimbabwe, Aksum (Ethiopia), and Mali, to name but a few.

4. **The colonial experience varied across Africa.** Although there were continuities, each European colonial power had its own approach to political and economic control. The impact of colonization also varied across and within the colonies of a particular European power depending on factors such as the presence of colonial officials or settlers in a particular area and whether/not cash crops were produced or minerals extracted.

5. **African states began to reclaim independence in the 1950s.** In the 20 years between 1957 and 1977 forty-two African states gained independence from a European colonizer, most of them in the 1960s. Some movements for independence involved armed struggle but most were won as a result of mobilization by a cross-section of Africans including labor union members and emerging political leaders.

6. **African identities are complex and using the word “tribe” misrepresents reality.** “Tribe” is a loaded word that offers little analytic insight. With no equivalent in many African languages, it reduces complex relationships and identifications to an oversimplified and misleading archetype. Using more accurate, and context specific terms such as people, ethnic group, nationality, community, village, chiefdom, or kin-group has more explanatory power.

7. **Africa boasts an extensive body of literature and film.** In addition to rich oral traditions, African writers and film makers have produced a vast range of work in African languages (e.g., Arabic, Swahili, Yoruba) and in the former colonial languages. Many have achieved international acclaim, winning awards at competitions on and off the continent. There are also popular genres of writing and filmmaking, the most prominent being Nigeria’s “Nollywood” – an African variant of Hollywood and India’s Bollywood.

8. **The African visual arts are highly varied.** Masks, figures, and other “traditional” arts, such as beadwork and ceramics, are only part of contemporary Africa’s rich visual culture. Pictorial signs, coffins in fantastic forms, digital photographs, and performance art are just a few examples of the African popular and fine arts forms that capture attention at home as well as in museums and galleries the world over.

9. **Africa is a rapidly urbanizing continent.** Africa has long and varied urban histories but urban growth today is unparalleled. Cities are growing at a higher rate than cities on any other continent, due both to rural-urban migration and population growth. More than 50 metropolitan areas now have anywhere from 1-15 million inhabitants.

10. **Africans are at the center of the mobile revolution.** More than half of the continent’s one billion persons have at least one mobile phone. As prices decrease and technology advances, smart phones are revolutionizing banking via mobile transfers, reorganizing business networks, and recalibrating the digital divide.
Truth and Reconciliation in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone was the site of a protracted civil war throughout the 1990s as Charles Taylor, then president of neighboring Liberia, backed Revolutionary United Front attempts to overthrow the ruling government and seize control of the nation’s rich diamond deposits. With more than 50,000 people murdered and countless others raped or recruited as child soldiers, the country faced a difficult journey towards reconciliation. A peace accord was signed in 1999. Taking the truth and reconciliation commissions in South Africa and Rwanda as a model, Sierra Leone convened its own commission the following year to impartially record the human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law committed during its civil war. Over the course of two years seven commissioners heard testimony from victims and perpetrators in order to better understand the conflict, provide recommendations for reconciliation, and suggest policies that could prevent future violations. After the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings ended, Sierra Leone created the Special Court for Sierra Leone that continues to try the greatest offenders against human rights during the civil war; passed a new Bill of Rights; and increased legislations protecting human rights.


Military Coup in Mali

On March 22, 2012, a group of soldiers overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) who was about to step down at the end of his second term. One of the central complaints of the coup leaders was that ATT’s administration had failed to adequately equip the Malian military in its fight against the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), a coalition of Tuareg rebel groups that regained strength following the fall of Muammar Khadafi. In response to the coup, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) quickly appointed mediators, imposed sanctions, and threatened military intervention to force a return to constitutional order. Under a negotiated agreement, ATT resigned and Dioncounda Traoré, the speaker of Mali’s national assembly, was sworn in as President. ECOWAS has lifted sanctions but it appears that the junta has retained influence, and it is yet to be seen when new presidential elections will be held. The MNLA and Ansar Dine, an Islamist group, took advantage of the power vacuum after the coup by seizing control of major northern cities and towns (including Kidal, Timbuktu, and Gao) and declaring the independence of northern Mali under the name of Azawad.

Gregory Mann, “The Mess in Mali.” http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/04/05/the_mess_in_mali


The Moor Next Door http://themoornextdoor.wordpress.com/

Bridges from Bamako (Bruce Whitehouse’s blog) http://bamakobruce.wordpress.com/
Consequences of Oil Drilling in the Niger River Delta

Between its rich oil fields in the Niger River delta and those located offshore in the Gulf of Guinea, Nigeria is one of the world’s leading oil producers. While bringing great wealth to the country, oil extraction in this region has serious environmental consequences that are receiving increasing attention. The risks of oil drilling came to the fore in 2008 when a Shell pipeline broke and released tens of thousands of barrels into the area surrounding Bodo, a town of nearly 70,000. While the oil company originally claimed that only 1,640 barrels were spilt, a 2012 study by Amnesty International suggests that it is in reality from 100,000 and 300,000 barrels. Unfortunately, this is not the first spill to affect the area and residents have been experiencing the consequences of 50 years of land and water pollution at the hands of leaking oil. With estimates suggesting 11 million barrels are released each year into the area’s ecosystems, a recent study by the United Nations found that it would take 30 years and over $1 billion to return the Niger River delta back to health.


Environmental Conservation And Sustainable Development

Economic expansion and the need for survival have put natural habitat in many African countries at risk. The Southern Highlands of Tanzania, for example, are an important agricultural area as well as a tourist attraction because they are home to numerous animal and plant species. The ecosystem of this vast region is severely threatened by the clearing of forests and grasslands for commercial agriculture; cutting of trees for timber, firewood, and charcoal; pollution of its rivers by pesticides and fertilizers; unmanaged hunting; and unsustainable trade in mammals, reptiles, frogs, and orchids. The declining forest cover endangers the region’s vital water supplies and the cultural identity of its population. The challenge for those working in the field of conservation is to promote environmental conservation without neglecting the needs of the people who depend on these forests and are eager for economic development.


WCS Tanzania – Southern Highlands Conservation Programme http://www.wcstanzania.org/shcp.htm

POPULAR CULTURE

Female Filmmakers

Much of the focus in the study of African cinema has been on films made by men. However, African women have been making films since the early 1960s. More recently, younger African women have been experimenting with the film form and exploring topics that are reflective of their globalized and hybrid identities. With its stunning landscapes and meticulous production design, Wanuri Kahiu’s *Pumzi* (Kenya, 2009) imagines a post-apocalyptic dystopia in which water is at a premium and a young woman holds the key to an alternative future. Akosua Adoma Owusu’s lauded *Me Broni Ba* (Ghana, 2009) wanders through salons in Accra; the director uses a mix of film and video footage assembling a rich reflection on colonialism and migration. Zina Saro-Wiwa’s *Phyllis* (Nigeria, 2010) and *The Deliverance of Comfort* (Nigeria, 2010) play with the Nollywood aesthetic to reflect on the nature of cultural appropriation and the power of ritual. Dyana Gaye reworks the musical genre in *Saint Louis Blues* (Senegal, 2009) as a motley group of travelers make their way from Dakar to Saint-Louis in a shared taxi. As this sample of recent films demonstrates, the vibrancy and creativity of African women making films today continues to enrich the world of cinema.


http://www.africanwomenincinema.org/AFWC/Blog.html
http://wanurikahiu.blogspot.com/
http://akosuaadoma.com
http://vimeo.com/16978085

South African Kwaito Music

Kwaito is a popular musical genre associated with contemporary, black, urban South African youth. Kwaito is dance music that emerged in the late 1980s and is commonly viewed as the music of the post-apartheid generation in South Africa. At the time, imported American and European house music was immensely popular among many South African youth. Kwaito was born when local DJs began remixing these house tracks, reducing the tempo, drawing influences from Bubblegum (a South African musical genre popular in the 1980s and influenced by Disco), and inviting local MCs to ‘rap’ over the beats. Kwaito peaked in popularity in the mid-to-late 90s and early 2000s, but the music continues to have an immense influence on South African popular culture and music.


Trade and Economics

Sino-African Relations

Merchants have been trading between East Africa and Southern China for at least seven centuries. However, the relationship between the People’s Republic of China and the African continent has intensified since China built the TAZARA Railway, which connects the Indian Ocean to Zambia’s mining fields, and supported the liberation movements of several sub-Saharan nations in the 1970s. Today, Sino-African trade amounts to more than $110 billion in goods each year and China is stepping up its presence, and increasing its influence throughout the continent. From $10 billion infrastructural projects in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to the development of manufacturing zones from Mozambique to Nigeria, and political support from South Africa to Sudan, the continent is increasingly looking East when it comes to trading and aid. Exchanging resources for infrastructure and bypassing the politics of the World Bank and the IMF, Sino-African relations are poised to increase as both sides, at least in the short-term, gain.


Africa in the World Economy

Trade has been integral to African economies long before Europeans arrived on African shores. Products such as grain, cloth, kola nuts, horses, gold, salt, and cowrie shells were traded across ecological zones as well as with Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East. The European colonial powers stimulated the export of agricultural products and minerals (e.g., peanuts, cotton, copper, cocoa, palm oil) needed for industrialization and consumer goods without building factories to transform these raw materials into finished goods, a legacy that African countries have yet to overcome. In recent decades, the World Bank and the IMF also encouraged African countries to rely on the export of a limited number of natural resources, including oil, diamonds, titanium, and other minerals. Although this list is being expanded with the addition of flowers, vegetables, and biofuels, it does little to enhance local productive capacity and keeps economies dependent on prices controlled by outside forces. The environmental impact of oil extraction in the Niger delta, for example, has been much publicized. However, issues such as the pressure on water resources or the consequences of the expropriation of land for the cultivation of some of the new crops are still less well known.


OTHER USEFUL RESOURCES


Africa Action, “Talking about ‘Tribe’: Moving from Stereotypes to Analysis,”
http://www.africaaction.org/talking-about-tribe.html

Allafrica.com – Aggregates reports from outlets across Africa and provides comprehensive coverage of the continent.