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, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda, and South Africa. Many of these countries are prominent in the news today: Liberia and Malawi, whose presidents Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and Joyce Banda are the continent’s two female heads of state; oil-rich nations like Nigeria; and, of course, Kenya, which witnessed one of its own, Lupita Nyong’o win an Academy Award in 2014. 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, demonstrating the importance of the African continent and some of the challenges it faces.

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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 2,000 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 centralised 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 or 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, chieftaincy, 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 filmmakers 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 to 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.
CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

The 2007 and 2013 Elections in Kenya

Given the successful presidential transition during the 2002 elections and Kenya’s emerging reputation as one of Africa’s most stable and developed nations, the violent protests following the 2007 elections stunned not only Kenyans but the entire international community. More than 1,200 persons died and over 500,000 were displaced after Mwai Kibaki, a member of the Kikuyu ethnic group, claimed victory. The violence was attributed to suspicions of vote rigging and tensions based on long-standing, perceived economic and social disparities between Kenya’s various ethnic groups. The trauma of the 2007 elections led to the creation of Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) to evaluate the divided country. Everyone approached the 2013 elections with caution, and both national and international leaders made pleas for a peaceful transition. Uhuru Kenyatta was announced the presidential victor over Raila Odinga, sparking some protests from Odinga supporters. Ultimately, the country experienced a relatively smooth transition and in May 2013, the TJRC released its final report contributing towards Kenyan healing and reconciliation.

Related Resources:

Boko Haram: Islamist Terrorism in Northern Nigeria

In December 1980, a radical Muslim group known as Maitatsine emerged in the northern Nigerian commercial city of Kano. The ensuing uprising which resulted in the loss of 5000 lives marked the beginning of Nigeria’s battle with Islamist terrorism. Alhaji Mohammadu Marwa Maitatsine, the leader of the group, preached against the use of modern technologies and was considered a rebel by mainstream Muslim clerics. He was killed in the Kano uprising, and the government of General Babangida was credited with crushing the last Maitatsine uprising in 1985. Yet, the same military government was responsible for creating the condition for renewed tension over the role of Islam in Nigerian politics by surreptitiously upgrading Nigeria’s membership in the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) the following year. In 1999, twelve northern states embraced full implementation of Shari’a. Given the federal government’s acquiescence to Shar’ia and concomitant confusion about the role of religion in a secular state, it is perhaps not surprising that Boko Haram made its first appearance in the northeastern city of Maiduguri the same year Islamic law was formally adopted by northern states. Founded by Mohammed Yusuf, a high school dropout, Boko Haram maintains that its members are committed to Jihadist conquest and total Islamization of Nigeria. Its targets are almost entirely symbols of Western influence. Boko Haram thus represents a reincarnation of an old Jihadist project driven by a complex interplay of social forces which include the youth bulge, extreme poverty, illiteracy, political demagoguery and similar factors associated with the failure of the Nigerian state.

Related Sources:
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 international attention. The risks of oil drilling came to the fore in 2008 when a Shell pipeline broke and released tens of thousands of barrels of oil into the area surrounding Bodo, a town of nearly 70,000. While the oil company originally claimed that only 1,640 barrels were spilled, a 2012 study by Amnesty International suggests that it was really between 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 due to leaking oil. With estimates suggesting that 11 million barrels are released into the area’s ecosystems each year, a recent study by the United Nations found that it would take 30 years and over $1 billion to return the Niger River delta ecology back to health.

Related Resources:
- http://georgeosodi.photoshelter.com/

Renewable Energy Projects across the African Continent

More than 69% of Africans lack access to electricity; in rural areas this figure increases to 85%. Seen as a region with enormous potential for developing clean, geothermal, hydro, wind, and solar energy, numerous initiatives have emerged to bring electricity to millions of Africans across the continent. ‘Power Africa’ was announced by President Obama in 2013 and invests in a range of energy projects, specifically targeting Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Liberia, and Nigeria in its early stages. The goal is to add more than 10,000 megawatts of clean, efficient electricity generation capacity. In Rwanda’s Rwamagana District, a Dutch Firm is investing US$23.7 million in a solar power complex that aims to bring solar energy to reduce pressure on the country’s national power utility. In Senegal, the private firm, Solar Senegal, seeks to bring advanced solar technology and energies to the entire country as a way to move beyond its current energy deficiencies. Across the continent, innovative and ambitious programs, both at local and regional levels, are taking form in an effort to harness and stabilize Africa’s renewable energies for the future.

Related Resources:
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.

Related Resources:
- http://www.africanwomenincinema.org/AFWC/Blog.html
- http://akosuaadoma.com
- http://vimeo.com/16978085

African Jazz

Jazz in Africa has a long and beautiful history. Whether it is a product of black music in America and the Caribbean or a continuation of African musical traditions that had found their way back home is subject to debate. African jazz can best be described as a genre where traditional and modern sounds meet to produce music and relationships amongst people in Africa and the Diaspora. Musician Fela Kuti used his compositions and album visuals to protest against the government in Nigeria, while vocalist Miriam Makeba and her song “Pata Pata” introduced international audiences to South Africa and the system of apartheid that existed there. Kuti and Makeba are part of a long line of musicians from Africa who have used their music to bring awareness to social issues in Africa while also dispelling the myth that African people are primitive. Through their artistry they were able to bring their culture to a global audience and sustain their popularity. Other internationally renowned jazz figures include Guy Warren (Ghana), Salah Ragab (Egypt), Manu Dibango (Cameroon), and Mulatu Astake (Ethiopia). Currently there are a host of jazz festivals in Algeria, Morocco, Senegal, South Africa, and Tunisia. One of the more popular jazz festivals is the Saint Louis Jazz Festival in Senegal that has been host to a series of jazz musicians and tourists for over twenty years.

Related Resources:
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. In 2013, Sino-African trade surpassed $200 billion making China Africa’s largest trading partner at present. 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 trade 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.

Related Resources:

Open-air Markets

Open-air markets have existed in many African countries for centuries. They distribute a variety of products including foodstuffs, clothing, textiles, and manufactured goods. From Kumasi Central Market in Ghana, one of West Africa’s largest, to smaller neighborhood and village markets, open-air markets operate within the informal economy sector, yet they can profoundly impact the so-called formal economy. They are not only a place of economic exchange but also a hub where a variety of social activities take place. Market-goers share community and family gossip, discuss politics and news, and learn about upcoming events. In the Kumasi Central Market, one can find just about anything: appliances, electronics, new and second-hand clothing, shoes, watches, jewelry, dishes and other household items, and of course foodstuffs—fresh produce, smoked fish, cassava flour, rice, and cooking oil. One can also buy prepaid minutes for cell phones, play the lottery, or get an electronic device repaired. However, for those living in Kumasi, a trip to the central market is not a daily activity. Because getting to it often requires traveling on public transportation through busy traffic and then maneuvering the densely populated market, people typically frequent the Central Market when a particular item is needed (e.g., textiles) or stock up on food and household items for the week. Even as shopping malls, boutiques, and indoor grocery stores are emerging across Africa, people still prefer to do the bulk of their shopping in the Central Market or in smaller neighborhood markets.

Related Resources:
OTHER USEFUL RESOURCES


“Africa South of the Sahara” Web Portal.
http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/ssrg/africa/guide.html — Provided by Stanford University, this web portal provides access to resources about Sub-Saharan Africa. Browse by country or topic.

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.