

Critical Review of “Africa in Global History” by Robert Harms

When describing the role of Africa in world history, Robert Harms gives a strong description of Africa’s cultural and geographic contributions. Harms begins by discussing the many ways that various African societies contributed and interacted with the rest of the world. In doing so, Harms gives the reader a strong starting point for exploring Africa itself and the world around it.

Harms begins with an overview of the hunting and foraging that everyone in the world relied on for survival. Much of the chapter is focused on the transition from hunting and gathering to urbanized states. Beginning with the Agricultural Revolution, Harms uses this information to expand on what influence these adaptations had on the interconnectedness of Africa with the world as a whole.

Within each section of the chapter, Harms carefully provides evidence to debunk and clarify certain misconceptions. For example, when talking about the agricultural revolution, Harms states that “We often think of agriculture as more advanced than hunting and gathering because of its own association with state building, literacy, and urbanism. Research has shown, however, that early farmers actually labored longer than hunter-gatherers to produce the same number of calories, and that the farmers’ grain-based diet was less healthy and less varied than the diets of hunter-gatherers.”¹

¹ Robert Harms, *Africa in Global History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2018), 46.

By providing such evidence, Harms not only provides more sincerity for his information, but also offsets the bias or preconceptions of the reader. This was especially true for me since I have no background on African History. This chapter also covers the significance of geography and climate in the success of foraging and farming.² While this can provide clarification about the differences between the two, it also provides background information for urbanization and ultimately the formation of states.

Harms' description allows the reader to compare and contrast the changes in Africa with those occurring elsewhere in the world. In addition, Harms explains the significance of certain symbols that were rooted in the agricultural origins of civilizations like the Egyptians. "Burial mounds, such as one containing a carved stone cow and another, built 7,400 years ago, containing the bones of a young cow in an elaborate burial chamber, are evidence of a cattle cult at Nabta Playa. Later, cattle would become a central symbol in the belief system of pharaonic Egypt."³

Showing the reader movements of societies throughout Africa is an effective way to tie Africa's history into later events involving other areas of the world. The focus on geographic advantages offers insight to the rise of larger powers like Egypt and the desire of outside civilizations like the Romans to have a presence there.⁴ Harms manages to relate these themes to later events such as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and Europe's "scramble for Africa".⁵

² Harms, 46-47

³ Harms, 48-49

⁴ Harms, 53

⁵ Harms, 373

One major strength of this book is that it allows someone with little knowledge of African History to place events within Africa in the global context. Throughout the book, it is apparent that Africa experience similar and often the same periods and transitions as Europe or Asia.⁶ For someone like myself who's focus has been on Europe, Harms' writing structure has made it easier to conceptualize the history of Africa as a whole.

Egypt's exposure to the rest of the world and the consequences this had on Africa's interaction with the world is highlighted in chapter 2.⁷ Placing Africa within world history is much easier when there is a well-documented example such as this. Egypt as a starting point for African history can dispel any notions that Africa did not have any significance prior to European contact. While Africa's history goes well beyond Egypt, it is part of African history and connects it to much of the rest of the world during the time.

Providing information about Egypt allows a reader to understand that Africa not only had contact with the world long before the arrival of Europeans, but also that it has complex societies and systems that are often not as well-known. Harms covers this at great length when he discusses the Egyptian influence in the Nile Valley. "The astonishing achievements of the ancient Egyptians owe much to the power of the state to mobilize the intellectual resources of the country and channel them in support of the pharaohs and their projects."⁸

Giving this kind of background information was especially helpful to me and was easy to understand. In doing this, Harms gives the reader the ability to comprehend the history of

⁶ Harms, 51

⁷ Harms, 57-60

⁸ Harms, 57

Africa long before the more well-known Egyptians or even Europeans. Again, this clarifies some misconceptions about Africa but also places it in world history.

As Harms mentions in chapter 2, many advancements in technology originated in Africa. “Like the satellite villages at Jenne-Jeno, the seasonal camps were economically specialized for farmers, fisherman, potters, weavers, or metalworkers.”⁹ This is just one example of developments in technology that are not commonly attributed to Africa.

With the shortage of experience that many including myself have with African history, Harms presents information in a manner that can connect it to more commonly studied topics such as European history or western civilization. This was particularly useful to me because it drew on my knowledge of other times periods and events to grasp the importance of Africa’s place during those times.

Overall, Harms’ writing style is very organized and easy to understand. As someone who has very little experience with African history I found this particular chapter very informative and helpful in understanding Africa. The information did not just provide a background on Africa, but also how it is important to world history.

⁹ Harms, 71