AFRICA'S DISCOVERY OF EUROPE

1450 – 1850

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In September 1895, three dignified rulers from the Tswana people of southern Africa (modern Botswana) arrived in London, the first official visitors to Europe from that nation. Over the next three months they made an extensive tour of England, Scotland, and Wales, seeking and receiving British support for protecting their homeland from the encroachment of European settlement. They secured the support of the British Colonial Secretary and received an audience with Queen Victoria. From the extensive coverage their visit received in the press and other records a recent book is able to recount the Tswana chiefs’ impressions of this land and people so distant from their homes. Among other reactions, they experienced trepidation at the height of an iron suspension bridge, were delighted by the riches and beauty of Windsor Castle, and found its royal occupant kind and charming, although remarkably short and stout.  

For all the sensation the three Tswana kings created, such African visitors in Europe were not a phenomenon that began in the era of global imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century. African princes, kings, and dignitaries from below the Sahara had made their way to European capitals and courts for several centuries. A few black Africans had been present in the Mediterranean world since antiquity, but Western Europe’s knowledge of black Africa broadened when Crusaders brought back word of kingdoms of black Christians who dwelt beyond the boundaries of the Islamic world. This unexpected news manifested itself in the reportryal of Saint Maurice as a black African knight, in the presence of Africans in the statuary of the north porch of the thirteenth-century Chartres cathedral, and in the legend that first appeared after 1150 of “Prester John,” a powerful Christian ruler somewhere on the Indian Ocean rim. The number of Africans in Europe grew after 1300, as delegations traveled from African kingdoms and as slaves brought from sub-Saharan Africa began to outnumber slaves of eastern European origins. The fifteenth-century Portuguese voyages along the Atlantic coast of Africa greatly increased the movement of both elite and
enslaved Africans to Europe and led to a second arena of encounter between Africans and Europeans in coastal Africa. Thus the middle of the fifteenth century marks the beginning of an era of continuous and increasing interaction between the two continents and their cultures.

As commercial and cultural interactions grew both Africans and Europeans made many adjustments in their ideas of each other. This study is concerned with presenting the long-neglected African side of these meetings, but it is useful to begin with a few words about the changes in European perspectives about Africans. In antiquity and during most of the Middle Ages, European images of Africans had been fairly rigid and dominated by abstract symbolism. Thus, European artists and thinkers before 1400 usually depicted Africans as the opposite of themselves; they were the "other" in current academic usage. Some ancient drinking cups, for example, depicted a dark African face on one side and a light European one on the other. This physical duality became overlain with an ideological one after Islam displaced Christianity as the dominant religion of North Africa. Although Europeans were well aware that North Africans looked little different from southern Europeans, Muslims were frequently depicted with black faces. Verbal usage was often no clearer. Dark-skinned "Blackamoors" from below the Sahara might be distinguished from the lighter "Moors" of North Africa, but often the two terms were used so interchangeably that it is difficult to sort out the meanings. The impression was a product of the fact that in European minds the symbolism of the terms was more important than the reality of individual pigmentation. Africans were tokens, not persons.

However, as Africans became more common in Europe, reality began to triumph over imagery in Western art—or at least reality began to temper the images. The arrival of Ethiopian delegations confirmed the long rumored existence of black Christians, breaking down the Islamic stereotype of Africans. A parade of African princes produced a striking change in paintings of the three Magi who came to worship the Christ child. Whereas earlier all three had been of light complexion, by the end of the fifteenth century the convention of portraying one of them as dark skinned became firmly established in Western art. In these and other Renaissance paintings and drawings the generic black faces of earlier centuries were replaced by portraits that are not only personal, but distinguishable today as people from Ethiopia, from West Africa, or from West Central Africa. The artists' recognition of Africans' physical diversity was accompanied by a clear recognition of their social diversity as well, for paintings also show both the African kings and the African servants of wealthy southern European households. Thus, even as the first Portuguese explorers contacted the people of sub-Saharan Africa, the image of Africa in European minds was already changing.²

ELITE AFRICANS IN EUROPE TO 1650

Africans were also expanding their knowledge and understanding of Europe. The first persistent effort to build ties to Europe came from the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia in the mountainous highlands of the upper Blue Nile. The kingdom's rulers had adopted Christianity in the fourth century, and the dynasty in power in the fourteenth century claimed descent from King Solomon of ancient Israel. For at least a century the Negus Nagast (king of kings or emperor) of Ethiopia had maintained a permanent listening post in the eastern Mediterranean through the Ethiopian monks who served as protectors of some of Jerusalem's Christian holy places. Perhaps prompted by the declining fortunes of the Christian communities in Egypt and Nubia, King Wedem Ar'ad of Ethiopia sent a delegation of thirty persons to Europe in 1306, seeking to forge a pan-Christian alliance against the Muslims who were worrying his neighbors. It appears that the delegation called on rulers in Spain and visited Pope Clement V at his palace in Avignon in southern
France. On the pope’s recommendation they journeyed on to Rome to visit the churches of Saints Peter and Paul. Then, from Genoa, they secured passage back home via the Red Sea.³

No alliance emerged from this embassy, but it probably accounts for the papal letters that were sent out to the ruler of Ethiopia in 1329 and the dispatch of an Italian Dominican bishop to the kingdom the next year. From such European visitors Ethiopian rulers gathered news of the changing political geography of Mediterranean Europe. Such contacts were also at the root of Europeans’ identification of the mythical Prester John, a Christian prince of the Indian Ocean region, with the Ethiopian dynasty.

Later emperors directed new embassies to Europe when the occasion warranted it. In 1402 Ethiopian ambassadors presented gifts of leopards and aromatic spices to the Doge of Venice. In 1428 Emperor Yishak (r. 1413–1430) proposed an alliance between Ethiopia and the kingdom of Aragon that was to be sealed by a double marriage of King Alfonso V’s daughter to the emperor and the king’s son to Yishak’s daughter. This proposal was not completed, but Yishak’s successor, Emperor Zera-Yakob (r. 1434–1468), the author of several works of political theology and an ardent and tyrannical promoter of ecclesiastical reform and royal centralization, in 1450 dispatched four Ethiopians to Alfonso, who by then was also ruling the kingdom of Naples. One object of this mission was to hire European artisans, whose technical skills an earlier Ethiopian appeal had enumerated: miniaturists for manuscript illumination, goldsmiths and silversmiths, architects, carpenters, organ-makers, glassmakers, trumpeters, and makers of all sorts of arms. In 1452, an Ethiopian ambassador named George went to Lisbon, while in 1459, another Ethiopian went to the Duke of Milan, who wrote the Ethiopian emperor a letter inquiring whether he possessed the magic books written “by his ancestor Solomon”⁴—a likely reference to the remarkable Kebara Nigast, the Ethiopian Book of the Glory of Kings.⁴

Meanwhile, the Muslim armies of the Ottoman Turks were assaulting the last outposts of Byzantine Christianity in the eastern Mediterranean. When the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453, leaders in the Latin West knew for themselves the fear of Muslim power that had been worrying Ethiopia’s rulers for a century and a half. To meet the Muslim threat, the Patriarch of Rome (the pope) called a church council, which met at Ferrara and Florence from 1437 to 1445, in hopes of forging a united Christian front by healing the long-standing breach between Rome and the Eastern Churches. The council was attended by the exiled Byzantine emperor and Patriarch of Constantinople, by the head of the Russian church, and by delegates from the Patriarch of Alexandria (to whose jurisdiction the Ethiopian church belonged), along with two monks sent from Jerusalem to represent the Ethiopians. One of the Ethiopian monks, who bore the name of Peter, the first of the apostles and the patron of the Latin Church, made a powerful impression when he told the pope at Florence in 1441 that the Ethiopian emperor was eager “to be united with the Roman Church and to cast himself at your most holy feet.” Perhaps Peter was carried away by the fervor for Christian unity, for it is very doubtful if Emperor Zera-Yakob would have endorsed such views, if he even knew of them. In any event, the Ethiopian church was not part of the short-lived Christian union that resulted from the council. Still, the Ethiopian delegates had made an impression. Their images were subsequently cast into the bronze doors made for the new Basilica of Saint Peter (1445), and an African prince also appeared in the Journey of the Magi painted by Bennozzo Gozzoli for Medici Palace in Florence (1459).⁵

We do not know precisely how news of the council was received and interpreted in Ethiopia, but between 1481 and 1490 three more Ethiopian delegations came to Europe to discuss Christian unity. To accommodate the first, which included a cousin of the emperor, Pope Sixtus IV repaired the church of Saint Stephen the Great and an adjoining house in the Vatican. Known thereafter as Saint Stephen of the Ethiopians, this facility functioned as a hospice for Ethiopian visitors and pilgrims during the next two centuries, as well as a center for Ethiopian studies in Europe. There between 1537 and 1552 the remarkable Ethiopian scholar Thasfa Seyon (known to Europeans as Peter the Ethiopian) edited and published a New Testament and a Missal in Ge’ez, the Ethiopian liturgical language, with the aid of two Italian Dominicans. In explanation of his presence and purpose, he wrote, “I am an Ethiopian pilgrim ... from the land of the infidels to the land of the faithful, through sea and land. At Rome I found rest for my soul through the right faith.” These were diplomatic words that did not mean Thasfa thought Ethiopian Christians were any less a part of the true Christian faith.⁶

By the late fifteenth century, other royal and diplomatic delegations from Atlantic Africa were arriving in southern Europe by means of Portuguese ships. Surviving accounts of these visits tell more of European reactions to the Africans than they do of African reactions to Europe, but African agendas are implicit in the sending of such delegations to Europe and in the subsequent course of their relations. As subsequent chapters examine in detail, these parties from Africa’s Atlantic coast were often as concerned as the Ethiopians were with establishing religious ties with the Latin West, but they were likewise interested in obtaining technical assistance (largely military) and in expanding the commercial exchanges that the Portuguese voyages had opened up. Although the Portuguese ships had been bringing captives back from Atlantic Africa since the 1440s, a regular parade of official delegations from that coast reached Portugal from the 1480s on. The first, in 1484, came from the kingdom of Kongo on the lower Congo River. The king of Benin sent an embassy to Portugal in 1486. Delegations from the Jolof kingdom on the lower Senegal River came to Portugal in 1487 and 1488. A new Kongolesian embassy in 1488–1490 helped make the monastery of Saint Eloy in Lisbon a second center of African studies in Europe, where Kongolesian learned European religious and secular knowledge and where
Enslaved Africans in Europe

Kings and ambassadors were not the only Africans whose numbers were rising in Renaissance Europe. From the fifteenth century European artists regularly depicted Africans in dignified but humbler roles as servants, musicians, laborers, and artisans. Fadua artist Andrea Mantegna depicted an African woman servant in his portrait Judith in 1491, while a black gondolier glides along a Venetian canal in Vittore Carpaccio’s Miracle of the True Cross (1494). A combo of African musicians adds contemporary detail to the Portuguese painting of Saint Ursula and Prince Conan of 1520. Much better known are the German artist Albrecht Dürer’s striking engravings of a black man (1508) and of an African woman named Katherina. This second group of Africans in Europe were the product of the African slave trades via the Sahara and the Atlantic.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as Charles Verlinden has documented, the number of “blacks” was rising among the mostly Slavic and North African slave populations of Mediterranean Europe. In Sicily in the late thirteenth century, for example, white slaves still were more common than those identified as “black” or “olive” (a category that might include mulattoes), and female slaves were two or three times as numerous as males. In the notarial records on which Verlinden relies most blacks (and some white, brown, and olive-hued persons) were termed “Saracens,” that is, Muslims, a fact that is also evident from the names of black slaves: Fultima, Said, Arrashte, Museyd. This suggests that most blacks in Europe before the fifteenth century had not been born below the Sahara, but were from the slave populations born in North Africa whose ancestors had been brought across the desert.

However, as the supply of slaves coming into Mediterranean Europe from the southern Slavic regions was interrupted during the fifteenth century by Ottoman conquests, European merchants increased their purchases in the slave markets of North Africa to such a degree that dark-skinned slaves became the majority in Europe. By the end of the fifteenth century one estate in southeastern Sicily had twenty adult slaves, eight female, twelve male, all of whom were blacks except for two of the women. The African slaves were employed in agriculture. In the neighboring kingdom of Naples, which Ethiopian delegates visited in the second half of the fifteenth century, imported Africans constituted 83 percent of the slaves, who labored in sugar cane fields, vineyards, and other forms of agriculture. Given the high demand, it is likely that most such slaves originated in sub-Saharan Africa and had been brought across the desert to North Africa and then sold to Italy.

By the second half of the fifteenth century Portuguese ships were also
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bringing enslaved people directly from sub-Saharan Africa. Of the first group of various skin hues who had been captured in southern Morocco in 1444 and brought back to Portugal, four were given to churches or monasteries and one eventually became a Franciscan friar. As the Portuguese expeditions pushed further south along the African coast, the number of slaves increased steadily, reaching an average of 700 a year in the 1480s and 1490s before beginning to decline. Nearly half of the slaves brought to Portugal from Africa were sold to other lands, especially to the Spanish kingdoms. By the mid-sixteenth century Africans made up 10 percent of the population of Lisbon, Portugal’s capital city, and nearly 7.5 percent of the population of Seville, the chief Spanish port. In the Iberian kingdoms most African slaves became urban servants and artisans, although some were used in agriculture in southern Portugal. To deal with the needs of the rising African population in their Spanish kingdoms King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1475 appointed the “Black Count” Juan de Valladolid as mayoral (steward) of the blacks in Seville.¹⁰

Other African captives went on to the Netherlands and southern France, a few even further. In 1555 John Lok, a London merchant’s son, brought to England five West Africans whom he had acquired in Portugal. The names of three are known: Binne, Anthonee, and George. A contemporary account allows a small insight into their impressions of England, noting that they were “tall and strong men [who] could well agree with our meats and drinks[, although] the cold and moist air does somewhat offend them.” The latter experience was echoed 340 years later by the Tswana chiefs who “appeared to keenly feel the sudden change from the tropical heat to English autumnal weather.” More and more Africans were brought to England, where it had become a desirable mark of distinction by the 1590s for elite families to have an African or two among their servants. Queen Elizabeth I, who had been entertained by black musicians and dancers two decades earlier, in 1596 issued an order to expel all blacks from her kingdom, concealing her evident prejudice under the specious complaint that the modest number of African “infidels” there were consuming food needed by the native English population. The order appears to have had little effect.¹¹

Details of the lives of African servants and slaves in Europe in this period are very limited. Still, it is evident that Africans readily learned European languages and adopted Christian names and religious practices. Indeed, the enthusiasm Africans showed for Iberian Catholicism—joining lay brotherhoods and, in some cases, following religious vocations—suggests that Christianity had a positive appeal. One study of Africans in Portugal concludes, “On the whole, Christian and African moral codes were not incompatible and Catholicism offered an attractive channel for expression of the blacks’ religious feelings.” Even at this early date some Africans gained an exceptional mastery of European culture. To assist him in his Latin school in Évora, Portugal, in the mid-sixteenth century, for example, Flemish humanist Nicholaus Cleynaerts (known as Clenardus) trained three black slaves to drill his students in Latin oral dialogues. Clenardus later published these dialogues in a work he entitled Grammatica Aethiopica (Ethiopian Grammar) in honor of his assistants. At much the same time, John Lok’s five Africans were learning English so they could serve as interpreters and intermediaries in the African trade.

Along with examples of Africans’ skill in acquiring European culture and their apparently harmonious assimilation into the domestic servant classes, one also finds evidence of how Africans resisted their bondage and tried to affirm their original cultures. One obvious form of resistance practiced by many was to try to escape from slave status either by flight or by legal manumission. A very early example found in the archives is of an unnamed forty-year-old black slave who fled from his Barcelona owner in 1407, only to be caught and returned. Some Iberian slaves obtained their freedom in return for years of faithful service, such as the slave of a Portuguese man who received his freedom in 1447 on the condition that he remain in his owner’s service for another five years. Another slave, born in Africa and renamed Martin, obtained from his Barcelona owner a written promise of manumission in 1463 in return for twelve years of faithful service. Rather than hoping for such kindness to come their way, African slaves in Iberia commonly exercised their legal right to purchase their freedom with the portion of wages they were allowed to keep from outside employment. For example, a twenty-five-year-old black slave from Catalonia in 1441 arranged to ransom himself over a five-year period for a sum 20 percent above his original purchase price.¹³ By such means, the proportion of free blacks in Iberia steadily rose.

Many Africans in Europe, free and slave, successfully incorporated elements of their original cultures into their new lives. One area of cultural retention was music. African musicians and dancers were in great demand in sixteenth-century Iberia, and enthusiasm for black musicians remained common in Europe for centuries. Most of their instruments and melodies were European, but their musicianship incorporated techniques from their homelands. The names given to African dances suggest even stronger connections to the mother continent: Guinea, Ye-Ye, Zarambque, and Zumbé.¹⁴ A description from 1633 of how blacks celebrated a Catholic feast in Lisbon suggests that African musical and dancing traditions also informed their religious sensibilities:

On the day in question, the blacks donned their native dress of loincoths or skirts and tied ornamental beads around their heads, arms and chests. So attired, they marched and danced, some in African fashion, through the streets to the sound of castanets, drums, flutes and African instruments. A few of the men carried bows and arrows, while the women bore on their heads baskets full of wheat given to them by their masters.¹⁵

Other records give the impression that the African encounter in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe was most often not distinctively European or distinctively African, but typically human. This is nowhere more apparent than in the sexual relations between Africans and Europeans, although cul-
tural, social, and physical differences mitigated the circumstances. Since most African slaves were servants, one might imagine that they were likely to be sexually exploited by their masters and mistresses. The frequent mention of mulattoes is a clear indication of illicit or sanctioned sexual unions between blacks and whites. However, there is also some suggestion that unions between Portuguese and African-born slaves were not particularly common. Cultural differences were one impediment, and it seems that many Portuguese did not consider blacks physically attractive. Marriage resisters suggest that, while sexual relations and marriages between free persons and slaves were not rare, native Portuguese preferred lighter-skinned North Africans to the darker people from below the Sahara. Supporting evidence also comes from regulations in the episcopal constitutions of Lisbon and Évora that forbade priests from owning white women, but apparently did not consider black female slaves to be a sexual temptation.  

It is not recorded if sub-Saharan Africans similarly preferred mates nearer to their own pigmentation.

However, as the number of blacks in Iberian states increased and adopted European cultural and religious practices, prejudices seem to have softened rather than hardened, and impediments to sexual relations between Africans and Europeans declined. The public record is silent about most of these relations, but the Portuguese Inquisition recorded the case of a free black named Bastião who in his youth had been introduced to homosexual practices by a European man and who continued such activities in later life. In 1557 he was reported to the Inquisition by a Lisbon man who, apparently ignorant of Bastião's sexual preferences, had allowed him to share his bed. This being his second offense, Bastião was whipped and sentenced to ten years in the galleys.

Rather more revealing of the limits of prejudice are the records of marriages and marriage proposals between elite Africans and their Iberian counterparts. Class was a more pervasive force in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe than were culture and color, so both African and European patterns of family alliances favored marriages as part of diplomatic ties. One of the earliest was the proposal cited earlier by Emperor Yishak of Ethiopia to King Alfonso V of Aragon in 1428 that an alliance be sealed by a double marriage between their families. In the mid-sixteenth century a nobleman from the kingdom of Kongo married into the royal household of Portugal. A half-century later in 1607–1608, while on a visit in Portugal, a son of the newly Christian king of Warri in the Niger Delta married a Portuguese noblewoman. Waiving aside ordinances that prohibited such marriages to new Christians, the bureau that processed his application gave its approval by declaring the West African to be an old Christian of noble blood.

**DISCOVERING EUROPEANS IN AFRICA**

As these examples reveal, before 1650 black African visitors were becoming familiar with parts of Europe and with European culture and beliefs. As a consequence Europeans also became familiar with the appearance of Africans, so the Portuguese on the early voyages of exploration in the Atlantic coast were not surprised to encounter dark-skinned people below the Sahara. But most residents of sub-Saharan regions were clearly astounded by these first encounters. The sight of pale-skinned people in odd clothing arriving on ships of unknown design must have been as startling as extraterrestrials emerging from a flying saucer would be to people today. The Atlantic coast down which the first Portuguese sailed was the most isolated part of the continent, whose inhabitants, unlike those in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, had not experienced prior contacts with foreigners from across the Sahara or across the Indian Ocean. The further south the Portuguese sailed, the less likely were coastal Africans to suspect that other continents, inhabited by nonblack populations, even existed. As the examples in the rest of this chapter demonstrate, it took a profound stretch of the imagination for many Africans to decide who or what their strange visitors were. Africans' struggles to understand a different branch of humanity have their naive qualities, but it took only a short time for most Africans to grasp the religious, cultural, and technological possibilities that these encounters opened up.

Africans on the Senegal River got their first sight of Europeans in 1455 when a Portuguese expedition sailed into view. Men and women crowded round to examine Cadamosto, an Italian member of the expedition, when he went on shore to visit their market. "They marveled no less at my clothing," he relates, "than at my white skin." Some Africans fingered his black damask doublet (tunic) and his grey woolen cape "with much amazement." Cadamosto further relates that "some touched my hands and limbs, and rubbed me with their spittle to discover whether my whiteness was dye or flesh." They were astounded to discover that his whiteness did not rub off.

African fishermen who ventured out to the ships anchored in their river expressed as much wonder at the Europeans' possessions as those on shore had at their persons. The ship first seemed to be some sort of monster, they told Cadamosto, the portholes in the bow looking like eyes through which it sighted its way across the water. Encouraged to come on board, the fishermen, accustomed to dugout canoes and paddles, were amazed "by the construction of the ship, by her equipment—mast, sails, rigging and anchors," as well as by the Europeans' ability to navigate when out of sight of land. Pointing out that finding one's way over long distances on land was difficult enough, they reasoned these European sailors must be truly great wizards to sail on the sea. The Senegalese fishermen also marveled at the many other material possessions of the Europeans, from musical instruments to a burning candle, and were amazed at the explanation of how they could make candles themselves from local beeswax.

Cadamosto says these practical-minded people were particularly impressed by the Portuguese weapons, both their crossbows (whose form they would have recognized from their own bows) and the unfamiliar cannon and muskets. They took fright when the Portuguese demonstrated the firing
of a mortar and expressed astonishment at the assertion (which seems exaggerated) that a single shot could slay more than a hundred men. Their conclusion that "it was an invention of the devil's" echoes the opinion people in many parts of the world came to form of the deadly weapons of the gunpowder revolution.20

Every encounter has its own unique aspects, yet these early Senegalese reactions to their first sight of Europeans display key elements that were repeated in subsequent encounters. Two things about the Europeans caught Africans' attention immediately: their strange physical appearance and their unfamiliar material possessions. It is also characteristic of later encounters that in their effort to account for these strange persons and objects, the Senegalese drew no sharp line between natural and the supernatural or magical elements. They were not speaking metaphorically when they suggested the Portuguese might be wizards and in league with evil spirits, for neither Africans nor Europeans of this era lacked credence in the power of supernatural forces to control their lives.

It did not take long before these first impressions led Africans to two more profound but somewhat contradictory conclusions. One was that these creatures, so different in appearance from normal (i.e., African) humans, might be dangerous sorcerers or evil spirits whose marvelous possessions came through the use of evil magic. Since such powers could only be obtained by malevolent actions that went against normal ethical values—such as murder, cannibalism, and other horrific rites—such wizards ought to be avoided. The second African conclusion went in the opposite direction: It would be good to befriend these visitors from across the ocean in order to acquire some of their marvelous goods and gain access to the spiritual power or practical knowledge that lay behind them. Tracing how these several responses played out over the next four centuries is the central task of this book.

Word of strange visitors spread rapidly. Africans along the Gambia River had already formed a very negative impression of Europeans during the few weeks it took the first Portuguese expedition to work its way south from the Senegal. As Cadamosto tells it, a fleet of large canoes surrounded the expedition as it mounted the Gambia in 1455, and poisoned arrows rained down upon the ships. When the Portuguese returned the fire with crossbows and cannon, the resulting consternation and bloodshed persuaded the Gambians to agree to a cease fire. Through interpreters the Portuguese asked for an explanation for the attack, insisting that the expedition members "were men of peace, and traders in merchandize," who wished only to have "peaceful and friendly relations ... with them, if they were willing." The Europeans asserted that they "had come from a distant land to offer fitting gifts to their king and lord on behalf of our king of Portugal." The Gambians replied that they already knew of the trade the Portuguese were engaged in along the Senegal River and were certain that if the Senegalese had sought Portuguese friendship, it could only be to gain access to their evil powers. For, the Gambians were sure, "Christians ate human flesh, and ... only bought blacks to eat them," a belief that would endure for the next four centuries. Finally, the Gambians asserted, they would rather slaughter the Portuguese and plunder all their goods than be on friendly terms with such monsters.21

On reflection, the Gambians must have realized that their chances of success in a violent confrontation with the well-armed Portuguese were remote. Cooler African heads soon decided there was more to be gained from trading peacefully with the Europeans than from fighting to destroy them. After negotiations with the local ruler on the Gambia, both sides agreed to open trading relations. Within weeks the Gambia River was on its way to becoming an important center of trade between Africans and Europeans.

Over the centuries Africans at dozens of additional sites along the Atlantic coast of Africa decided to open commercial relations with the merchants of many European nations. Yet the tug-of-war between material gain and moral repugnance grew stronger as the purchase of human beings grew in importance in the trade. Coastal Africans grew accustomed to the Europeans' appearance, but captives brought from inland regions for sale into the Atlantic slave trade were as struck with terror by the Europeans' strange looks and stranger intentions as those on the Senegal River had been in 1455. One eighteenth-century African echoed the Senegalese reactions three centuries earlier when he wrote that his belief that European seamen were monsters or spirits was reinforced by the seemingly magical way they could make a ship move across the water by means of "cloths put upon the masts by the help of ... ropes" and stop by dropping the anchor, as well as by their use of navigational devices such as the quadrant.21

Over time, Europeans and their ships grew to be familiar sights along the coast, but a white man could still excite great interest (and fear) in isolated parts of inland Africa centuries after Europeans first reached sub-Saharan Africa. At the end of the eighteenth century, Scottish explorer Mungo Park generated a range of reactions from the inland West Africans who encountered him as he trekked along the southern rim of the Sahara in search of the Niger River. Some individuals displayed a relatively sophisticated understanding, such as the ruler of the Fulani imamate of Bundu in December 1795, who spoke favorably of Europeans, "extolling their immense wealth, and good dispositions," although these compliments seem to have been part of a ploy—successful in the end—to relieve Park of his best blue coat. The king's wives' reactions were more direct:

They rallied me with a good deal of gaiety on different subjects; particularly on the whiteness of my skin, and the prominence of my nose. They insisted that both were artificial. The first, they said, was produced when I was an infant, by dipping me in milk; and they insisted that my nose had been pinched every day, till it had acquired its present unsightly and unnatural conformation.

Invited to the encampment of a Moorish people (the Oulad Mbarek) in March 1796 to satisfy the curiosity of the ruler's wife, Fatima, Park was received with great interest and a considerable lack of decorum:

My arrival was no sooner observed, than the people who drew water at the wells threw down their buckets; those in tents mounted their horses, and men,
women, and children, came running or galloping towards me. I soon found myself surrounded by such a crowd, that I could scarcely move; one pulled my clothes, another took off my hat, a third stopped to examine my waistcoat buttons …

There again the women restrained their curiosity least: "[T]hey asked a thousand questions; inspected every part of my apparel, searched my pockets, and obliged me to unbutton my waistcoat and display the whiteness of my skin: they even counted my toes and fingers, as if they doubted whether I was in truth a human being." A few days later a delegation of women visited Park on a brazen mission: "to ascertain, by actual inspection, whether the rite of circumcision extended to the Nazarenes (Christians), as well as to the followers of Mahomet." Park is discrete about the outcome of that particular mission, but notes that the women "were very inquisitive, and examined my hair and skin with great attention; but affected to consider me a sort of inferior being to themselves, and would knot their brows, and seem to shudder, when they looked at the whiteness of my skin."

Other inland Africans expressed their surprise or horror at such a sight in more demonstrative ways. For example, the first European to enter the Hurutse capital of the Tswana people of modern Botswana in about 1820 recorded, "The sight of the white men threw [the crowds of adults] into fits of convulsive laughter." The children "screamed, and in the utmost horror fled to the first place of concealment they could find." At about the same time a neighboring Tswana people began to describe Europeans as "white lice" of the sort that occupied the hind quarters of domestic animals. It was not meant to be flattering metaphor:23

Africans of greater sophistication might conceal their distaste at what they saw, but their reactions were not notably different. In 1824, Shaka, the great founder of the Zulu nation, disclosed his impressions of the handful of Europeans he had permitted to enter his southern African kingdom to his English friend Henry Fynn. Shaka conceded that the Europeans had inherited many valuable skills and manufactured goods from their ancestors, but he opined that such forefathers had held back "the greatest of all gifts, … a good black skin, for this does not necessitate the wearing of clothes to hide the white skin, which was not pleasant to the eye." To be sure, as Africans became more accustomed to the sight of "whitemen," their views moderated. The Zulu composer of "The Praises of Mbuyazi," a poem in Henry Fynn's honor, found a way of casting his skin in a somewhat more flattering light. Fynn was said to be:

Beautiful as the mouse-birds of the Bay,  
Which are yellowish on the wings.  
Our whiteman, through whose ears the sun shines.24

As these examples suggest, the age, sex, sophistication, and knowledge of African observers affected their responses. So too did the circumstances of the Europeans. The observations of a ruler on the Gold Coast in 1482, whose name the Portuguese rendered as "Caramanssa" (perhaps a corrup-
tion of Kwamin Ansa, i.e., King Ansa), are instructive. An official delegation from the king of Portugal had arrived in the realm to negotiate the construction of a trading fortress. Caramanssa graciously welcomed the delegation led by Diogo de Azambuja. Having bedecked himself from head to foot in golden jewelry in preparation for the meeting, the African ruler praised the appearance of the Portuguese delegates, who for their part had put on their finest silk and brocade garments, along with abundant jewels and gold. He noted the contrast between his official delegation and the occasional "ill-dressed and ragged" Portuguese who had visited his shores earlier, men whom he judged "fool and vile."25 In the era of the slave trade, Africans would continue to see a mix of Europeans "fool and vile" as well as richly clothed in silk and brocade, but, as in Caramansa's case, the goods Europeans brought to trade determined their welcome more than the finery of their appearance.

Europeans' reputation for valuable trade goods was evidently an important reason for the enthusiastic reception one group of Africans gave to the English explorer William B. Baikie and his party four centuries later. On a voyage of exploration in 1854 motivated both by an interest in geographical knowledge and commercial opportunities, Baikie's ship stopped for the night outside the walled town of Gandiko far up the Benue tributary of the Niger River. As Baikie tells it, most local Africans fled when they realized the visitors intended to come ashore:

the only person left to receive us, was a solitary individual, who between fear and excitement could hardly utter a single word. I walked up to him, extending my hand, which he surveyed most suspiciously, and at length touched it with as much reluctance as he would a piece of red-hot iron, but finding that it did not burn him, and that we were quite friendly, he threw down his spear, and danced and shouted for joy. . . . shouting all the time as he led us to the town] at the top of his voice in Hausa, "White men, white men! the Nazarenes [Christians] have come; white men good, white men rich, white men kings; white men, white men!"

Assured by this message that the visitors were friendly, townspeople crowded around them, some shaking their hands, others evidently showing their own absence of malice by pointing at the visitors with the butt ends of their spears and drawing empty bow-strings. Many, Baikie relates, "threw themselves on the ground and went through an extemporaneous course of gymnastics" in an apparent "ecstasy of delight." More sedately, the ruler of Gandiko "thanked God that the white men had come to his country."26

A careful analysis of Baikie's account also reveals other elements. The very first African reaction to the sight of the Europeans was fear and suspicion of their intentions; most hid themselves. This was true even though the inhabitants of this relatively sophisticated community clearly were not ignorant of the existence of such "Nazarenes," as they termed them in Muslim fashion. Gandiko was an unusual town. Settled by Fulani people in the
midst of a Jukun area, its inhabitants were able to speak the Hausa language widely used in the region by the Hausa trading people. Bakhke’s party may have been the first Europeans the inhabitants of the town had seen, but some had probably seen light-skinned North Africans who sometimes crossed the desert to the Hausa cities to the north. As improbably exuberant as the reactions of some Gandiko residents appear, Africans had a tradition of lavish hospitality that was well documented over the centuries.

Hospitality was indeed a virtue commended upon by nearly all European visitors to sub-Saharan Africa. Cadamosto, although characterizing Africans as ill-mannered at table (because they ate with their hands), as well as liars and cheats, praised them for being generally “charitable, receiving strangers willingly, and providing a night’s lodging and one or two meals without any charge.” Such hospitality had also been commented upon by early Muslim visitors to sub-Saharan Africa, such as North African traveler Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century and Leo Africanus in the 1510s, as well as many later nineteenth-century European explorers. For various reasons such hospitality might be withheld as well. After escaping from Africans who had mistreated him, denied him food and water, and robbed him, Mungo Park reached the Fulani state of Segu, only to be refused shelter. Finally, an old woman took pity on him and offered him food and shelter for the night. While she and other women of the household stayed up spinning cotton, they improvised a song about their visitor:

The winds roared, and the rains fell.  
The poor white man, faint and weak, came and sat under our tree.  
He has no mother to bring him milk, no wife to grind his corn.  
Let us pity the white man; no mother has he, etc.  

As these examples suggest, West African reactions to unfamiliar European visitors showed many variations but also suggest that fear and curiosity, repugnance and attraction persisted over many centuries. Two early cases from below the equator permit these reactions to be explored in greater depth.

SOUTHEAST AFRICA, 1589–1635

Another rich trove of African reactions to first encounters with Europeans comes from the several accounts of Europeans shipwrecked along the coasts of Natal and southern Mozambique in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Chronicles of treks over several months to reach a port from where the refugees might get passage home tell of how rural African villagers reacted to the European refugees who passed their way. The most common response was the characteristic offer of hospitality, although, given the size of the parties, it is not surprising that Africans on this impoverished coast often sought payment in metal or cloth. But the accounts also reveal a deeper range of human interactions.

Compassion at the sight of unfortunate fellow humans—however strange in appearance—was often in evidence. The Africans in southern Mozambique who encountered survivors of the São Thomé wreck in 1589, for example, made the refugees welcome, offered them shelter, and came to stare. The “women of the village gathered to see the white women, as something marvelous, and all night they gave them many entertainments and dances.” At another village a few days later, the African women also marveled at the unfamiliar sight of their European sisters trudging toward their village and, “seeing them so weary and distressed, made signs of compassion, and drawing near caressed and fondled them, offering them their huts and desiring even to take them there at once.”

Thirty-five years later, Africans further south along the same coast expressed their heartfelt compassion in other forms for a different group of European castaways. Having learned in response to their questions the misfortune that had forced this strange group of men, women, and children to trek through their land, the villagers “twisted their fingers as if invoking curses upon whoever had caused our shipwreck.” The women and children in a village two days further on made even more dramatic gestures of their sympathy. They went down to the seashore and threw stones into the water, while apparently uttering curses on the sea that had caused such anguish: “[T]hen turning their backs upon it they lifted up the skins which covered their backsides and exhibited their arses to the ocean. This is the worst form of insult which they have, and they did it because they had been told that the sea was the cause of our suffering so many hardships and of our wandering for five months through strange lands.”

In other cases, Africans were initially less welcoming, withholding their hospitality and expressions of empathy until they were sure that the visitors were really humans. One group of African meeting the castaways of 1623 became suspicious that people who claimed they came from the sea might actually be some sort of sea creatures. They first asked the Portuguese to prove their humanity by showing their navels, and, after some did, the Africans asked them to demonstrate that they breathed like human beings. Although on this occasion the villagers seemed satisfied by these demonstrations, concluding, “These are human beings like us,” two centuries later Henry Fynn could report that the Zulu of much the same area were convinced that all Europeans had “sprung out of the sea.”

In 1635 a group of Natal Africans approached with caution yet another party of a few dozen Europeans stranded on their beach. Whether this caution sprang from fear of the strangers’ military or supernatural power is not clear. Each side approached the other warily, until, “being a stone’s throw apart” and apparently satisfied of the strange Europeans’ humanity and absence of ill intentions, the Africans “all rose and, clapping their hands and dancing in time with the sound and singing . . . , came toward us [Europeans] with great celebration and signs of joy.” A dozen years earlier, other African villagers in Natal met castaways with weapons drawn, convinced that they were cannibals, perhaps on good evidence in this case. By their own account, some of the refugees, after consuming their dogs,
satisfied their hunger by eating the bodies of dead members of their party, including some who were executed for such trivial offenses that one is led to wonder if they had not been killed in order to supply food.\textsuperscript{33}

But if some Africans were inclined to suspect the worst of the castaways, others assigned lofty origins to them. In Natal in 1589 and again in 1593, other Africans decided, on the basis of the Europeans' light coloring, that they had come from the sky, rather than from the sea. One old man joyfully shouted to his village, "Come, come and see these men who are children of the sun." Believing these "children of the sun" to possess supernatural powers, sick and crippled Africans in one place asked the Portuguese leader for a spell to make them well. In another place people offered food to Europeans who would touch parts of the Africans' bodies that were in pain, and they went off singing when this was done. Another village refused burial to a deceased "child of the sun" lest his remains contaminate their land.\textsuperscript{34}

Aware of Africans' inclination to believe they possessed preternatural powers, Europeans sometimes actively promoted the notion to suit their own ends, especially by discharging their firearms. When fearful of being robbed or attacked, all three of the castaway groups of Portuguese mounted demonstrations of this unfamiliar technology. Sometimes the sound and fire of the guns reinforced African suspicions that the whites possessed powerful magic, and some sought to get these white wizards to cure their ills. In one case, an African attack on the castaways quickly came to a halt when three of their men were struck dead by a single shot. The Portuguese's fears that this deed would provoke retaliation proved false. Indeed, the dead men were blamed for their own deaths and punished by being left unburied, while the "king" of the area made a formal visit the next day and presented the Portuguese with an exceptionally fine ox as a gift. However much the firearms' underlying technology eluded them, Africans quickly grasped the practical implications of the weapons when the Portuguese shot an animal such as a cow. After one such demonstration, one clan chief examined the harquebus thoroughly and commented thoughtfully that since the gun could kill cows, it could also kill men. He soon withdrew to his villages.\textsuperscript{35}

KONGO COSMOLOGY

Like people everywhere, Africans sought to understand new experiences within existing cultural frameworks. We saw that Africans devised various tests to determine whether or not Europeans were humans like themselves: seeing if their skin color would wash off, checking for gills, counting fingers and toes, and so on. Placing Europeans geographically was much more of a problem for most Africans, who had no more idea of the existence of a continent of Europe in these early times than Europeans had of the existence of the American continents before 1492. Even though the large ships on which Europeans arrived made it generally clear that the pale visitors came from across the seas, it was not easy to decide if their home was a place like Africa or something of a quite different order. Just as some Europeans found it difficult to place Amerindians in the family of humanity descended from Adam and Eve, some Africans persisted in the belief that, despite a superficial resemblance to ordinary humans, Europeans were actually something else. Their odd appearance, strange ships, and unusual possessions suggested otherworldly origins. There are hints of this misperception in many early accounts, but the richest African cosmology of Europeans comes from the Kongo people, whose kingdom lay along the lower Congo River.

The Portuguese explorer Diogo Cão reached the mouth of the Congo River in 1483, where he left four missionaries to seek contact with the inland capital of the manikongo (the king of Kongo). Because the missionaries were still at the capital when he returned to fetch them, Cão sailed away with four Kongoese hostages, who were treated rather more as ambassadors by the time they reached Lisbon and were taught Portuguese so that they might serve as interpreters. The return of the four in 1485 was a key event in the formation of Kongoese perceptions of the Portuguese. The manikongo welcomed the four "as though they had seen them resuscitated from under the earth," a phrase, as anthropologist Wyatt MacCaffrey points out, that resonated with significance in the context of Kongoese cosmological beliefs about the world of the living and the world of the dead.\textsuperscript{36}

Drawing on the Europeans' arrival by ship, their appearance, and other aspects of their culture, many Kongoese regarded their visitors as voyagers from the world of the dead, a world that in their cosmology lay across the ocean. The unfamiliar language spoken by the whites and the rich and unusual presents they brought also served to mark them as not of this world. To the Kongoese, as to many other Africans, Europeans looked like people whose skin had been painted with white pigment, the color of the underworld. Analogously, their pale skins resembled those of albino Africans, whom the Kongoese believed were water spirits. Moreover, the claims of the king of Portugal to great authority were interpreted by the king of Kongo as a claim to superior spiritual powers. Finally, as will be examined in detail in the next chapter, the efforts of the Portuguese to introduce their religion, accompanied by claims of Christians' access to mystical powers, reinforced these impressions of the Europeans' otherworldliness.

Thus the welcome given to the repatriated hostages was one accorded to persons returning not from a distant land otherwise like their own, but from a place incomparably different: the underworld of the dead. In keeping with that perception, the manikongo dispatched Mani Vunda, the priest of the fertility cult addressed to the local spirits, as his first ambassador to Portugal. For the next five centuries Kongo relations with Europe were filtered through such cosmological presuppositions, each new encounter and understanding being interpreted in terms of such fundamental beliefs.

As in other parts of Africa, greater familiarity with Europeans soon
eroded the supernatural mystique the first comers acquired. This certainly occurred in the kingdom of Kongo too. A number of Kongoese gained firsthand experience of life in Europe, while many others came to know the Europeans who took up residence in their kingdom. Yet in the minds of many Kongoese these later experiences did little to alter the first impressions of Europeans as being from the land of the dead. MacGaffey found that, even after decades of Belgian colonial rule in the twentieth century, most Kongoese still interpreted Europeans in terms of a cosmology that posited the existence of two parallel worlds inhabited by the living and the dead and divided by water. The living were black in color, prone to disease and death, while the dead turned white and acquired magical powers and immortality.

As MacGaffey argues, although Kongoese perceptions may seem “mistaken, if not downright irrational” to those outside the cosmological system, such misperceptions were no stranger or more removed from empirical reality than were the racist images of Africans that took hold of European minds in modern times. The development and persistence of Kongoese images of Europe are especially richly documented, but very largely from the European side. Unfortunately none of the Kongoese who traveled to Europe wrote an account of their impressions and experiences there. Yet there is good reason to believe that the Kongoese cosmological conception of the encounter with Europe was not unique. Although documentation is thinner, other African societies must have interpreted their encounter in an analogous manner.

Africans’ first reactions to Europeans tell much of the rediscovery of humankind underway around the world in this era. Yet they also seem more naïve than Europeans’ reactions to their encounters with Africans. The educated Europeans who recorded these reactions may have exaggerated African responses somewhat, while presenting their own in a more sophisticated light, but there is good reason to expect that the differences were quite real. Europeans were intruding in various parts of Africa that had virtually no contact with the outside world, whereas Africans had become familiar sights in southern Europe much earlier. European seafarers were not encountering Africans for the first time, and most early ships carried African interpreters. For Africans who had had no previous inkling of the existence of Europe’s inhabitants and their material possessions, first sights could be traumatic. The more sophisticated concealed their wonder and disgust, but others exclaimed their amazement or tested the Europeans’ humanity in elementary ways. Some aspects of Europeans’ strangeness persisted, while others moderated with longer acquaintance. Perceptions of Europeans as fundamentally similar to Africans and as fundamentally different seem often to have coexisted. Rejection and attraction also went hand in hand. For reasons that are both realistic and deeply ingrained in African patterns of thinking, the Europeans’ culture, technology, and material goods proved to be highly attractive to Africans. The opening of trade also opened doors of understanding. In discovering Europeans, Africans would discover their own relative position in the larger world. In entering into Atlantic exchanges, they would test the strengths and expose the weaknesses of their own societies. These subjects are examined in the chapters that follow.

Notes


11. Peter Fryer, Straying Power: The History of Black People in Britain (London: Pluto Press, 1984), pp. 9–12, quote p. 5 (spelling modernized); Parsons, King Khama, p. 154. Eighty-nine Africans were subsequently exchanged for English prisoners in Spain, but many others remained even after a second banishment decree was issued in 1601.


15. In Saunders, Social History, p. 150.
17. Ibid., p. 160. Saunders found another example in 1565 of a free black man sentenced to the galleys by the Inquisition for sodomy.
25. There are two detailed accounts of this encounter. That by Ruy da Pina has been translated by John William Blake in Europeans in West Africa, 1450–1560 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1942), 170–78; a translation of the account by João de Barros is in Crone, Cadamosto, pp. 114–23.
27. Crone, Cadamosto, pp. 32–33.

Suggested Readings


