



# Interview with Professor John Thornton

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INTERVIEWERS – You are one of the most important scholars of History of Africa, enslavement and slave trade in Atlantic African societies during the Modern Age. How and when did you first get interested on these themes? Which books, ideas and/or experiences would you point out as fundamental for your intellectual trajectory?

JOHN THORNTON – To start, I would have to say that I've never really thought of myself as a historian of the slave trade, but rather a historian of Africa. However, you cannot do Africa without considering the slave trade, so naturally I had to devote a fair amount of my work to that topic. One of the things that I wanted to do was to “naturalize” African history into the more traditional forms of historiography already in existence. I sensed that African history had been captive to anthropology as a discipline, and while there were real advantages to sharing an outlook with anthropology, history has its own way of doing the same sort of things. So, it isn't surprising that I wanted to social and cultural history (as these concerns, arose also in anthropology and thus were already developed) as opposed to the more political and diplomatic tradition in history.

I was, like many others in my generation, drawn to the Annales school works from French historiography, and also to the neo-Marxist literature which everyone met in graduate school. An important reason for my choosing to work specifically on the Kingdom

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of Kongo was because its relatively dense body of primary sources made doing the kinds of work that was appearing in Europe under social and economic history possible. The Jesuit and Capuchin accounts of Kongo in the seventeenth century provided good understandings of the rural landscape, and of social relations at a micro level. As it happened I also discovered that I could use baptismal statistics left by these missionaries to do some quantitative demographic work.

As for the Marxist approaches, I was drawn to it because the basic model, encapsulated in the explorations they were doing on modes of production provided, I felt, a universal model that could be applied effectively to Africa. I was less interested in those days, in the other branch of Marxism which focused on what was called the “development of underdevelopment”.

One of my early discoveries, which I came upon in reading Braudel, in particular was that the world of the 17th century was not that different in Europe from what it was in Africa. The demographic work solidified that idea: I realized that fundamental vital rates, like infant mortality and life expectancy were about the same in Kongo as in France. This made me realize and orient my work around the idea that there wasn't a Third World in the 17th century like the one we experience today, which poverty, which can be measured by demographic rates, was a universal phenomenon and not one particular to Africa.

INTERVIEWERS – Would you identify political and/or intellectual contexts in your professional, personal and/or generational experience that influenced your career in the field of African history? How so?

JOHN THORNTON – As noted above, there is no doubt that the strongest influences in my work were the writings of the Annales School, particularly Ferdinand Braudel, Pierre Goubert, Emmanuel Leroi Ladurie, and Pierre Chaunu. They all worked on the early modern period, the one I wanted to work on, and they pioneered models of bringing in both elite and non-elite sectors of society. They were not afraid to use economic logic and thought to influence their work.

But they were also prepared to do close, scholarly work on primary sources, and to keep the evidence they produced visible to the reader, which is hard to do. I remember how awed I was by the footnotes in *The Mediterranean*, and I really enjoyed Braudel's bold statements, followed by scholarly proofs presented in a sort of conversational way. I can't say that my own writing matched that, but I certainly was influenced by it.

INTERVIEWERS – Within your extensive production, which works would you highlight as the most important? How have these works (books or other) contributed, in different historiographical contexts, to the knowledge of the history of Africa?

JOHN THORNTON – It would be hard not to say that *Africa and Africans in the making of the Atlantic World* was my most important contribution. It has been cited, according to Google Scholar over 1,600 times, which is amazing for a book of history, and rivals that of many works that don't deal with Africa, and even are considered classics. Not only that, but it continues, even after 25 years in print, to make sales, and I know that the vast majority of those sales are for classes. I am in awe that people still want their undergraduate students to read it.

However, as a personal favorite, I am still very fond of my first book, *The kingdom of Kongo: civil war and transition*, which was my dissertation, very lightly revised. Writing it was such a joy, I was really sad to have finished it (though I found writing the other books a pleasant experience also). I felt at the time I made great discoveries about how African societies worked, and I felt as though I had revolutionized the way Kongo would be dealt with. Alas, it isn't as though that many people had worked on it either before or after me.

I am also quite fond of *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684-1706*. It was my first attempt to do a biography, and in fact, I decided I was going to write a biography of a central African, but who? I tossed around D. Afonso I of Kongo, Beatriz Kimpa Vita, and then Queen Njinga, and finally decided to do Beatriz Kimpa Vita because I already had all the original documentation down from my first book. As luck would have it, my wife, Linda Heywood, decided to do Njinga herself, and now her book is out and already translated in French and Portuguese. Then, I just accepted a contract to write a biography of Afonso, so one way or another that's been done.

Biography is so much more story telling than doing the sort of analytical history I had been doing, chronology counts for more, and momentum is crucial. It's a very different way to write.

I have always striven to make my works accessible to students, particularly to college students who would be training teachers, because it means that they will refine and transmit what I'm writing to children under their care. I taught for 17 years at Millersville University (in Pennsylvania) which was primarily a teacher's college, and most of the students in my classes were planning to make a career in primary or secondary education. I wanted even my scholarly articles to be accessible to them.

It was this concern for accessibility that made me avoid technical language or intellectual jargon which has been popular for most of my intellectual career, first with Marxist language, then the language of post-structuralism and post-modernism.

INTERVIEWERS – In your work you have written about wars, enslavement, Catholicism in Africa, African religiosities and cultural dimensions. What else should we investigate? Which are the large gaps in the literature on history of Africa? And if there are indeed important gaps, which new or fresh contribution could they bring to the field?

JOHN THORNTON – To me, one of the saddest things that has happened recently is the dramatic, I would venture to say catastrophic decline in the research, study and writing of the history of Africa before 1850. Africa is a difficult place to study, there are language challenges in using the sources, and one has constantly to read between the lines of text to try to answer the questions you have.

So what needs to be done now is to re-engage with doing earlier African history, before 1850. We learned a lot about how to do that history, how to use oral tradition, how to understand archaeology and linguistics as sources, how to engineer our work to take advantage of every sort of information available to squeeze whatever can be squeezed out of these various sources and write whatever we can. But we must keep doing it.

INTERVIEWERS – Your studies highlight the active participation of African societies in the making of the Atlantic world, by breaking with a narrative of immobility and passivity in history. You have pointed out the agency of African societies in the enslavement, in the slave trade and in the economic, political and cultural making of the world West. In which ways would you say that this new understanding of history has challenged historiographical views that see Europe as the engine of the world during the Modern age? Can we say you have engaged in a dialogue the revisionism of the commercial capitalism theses and with the criticism of the idea of absolutist modern European state? Or is it merely an overlapping of similar ideas? How much did Braudel and others authors inspire you?

JOHN THORNTON – I have to say that I'm surprised at how much the discoveries I made while writing my dissertation/first book have continued to shape the way I deal with Africa. As I noted already, one of the reasons I chose to do the Kingdom of Kongo for my project was because I could engage it the way Goubert engaged France. That is not to say I intended to do a comparative piece, but only that I wanted to use the same techniques to understand it. But because the sources allowed me to do it, I quickly realized that at least at the time I was writing about there wasn't nearly as much different in what we would call development between Africa and Europe.

That idea was for me, revolutionary, and I thought that the demography issues settled it for me. I was taken by the implicit statement in my primary sources that the women who cultivated the land in Kongo did little labor and yet reaped abundantly, to be a statement of labor productivity. Much later, I added to this the production of textiles, when I realized that exports from the eastern part of Kongo to Luanda equaled annual production in the whole of South Holland. Textile historians informed me that the African textiles matched the finest European ones in quality. Then, I also read Candice Goucher's article that showed that Africans produced steel that was the same quality as Europeans.

So agricultural productivity, textile production, steel production that matched that of other continents, added with equal levels of life expectancy all led to the same conclusion: Africa was not backwards according to the instruments that economic historians typically consider crucial. This defeated, for me at least, the idea that the Europeans could force Africans, using their superior economic strength, to sell other Africans as slaves. Of course, I argued this case in a more limited way for Kongo, and then in *Africa and Africans* for the whole of Atlantic Africa.

Quite apart from this, I also discovered in my study of Kongo that it was more centrally governed than European countries were. Not that centralized government is a good thing in the way that making fine textiles or producing enough food to keep the population from premature death, but it is used as a measure of dynamism of whole societies. This is why I sometimes find myself annoyed by scholars who refuse to call societies like Kongo “states” because in some way or another they don’t match a Weberian definition of the state. But that is clearly blatant nonsense, in Kongo’s case, there is ample evidence to prove the contrary, and for most other African polities as well in this period.

I think there is a certain way in which modern historians are blinded by today’s reality. Since the transformation of Europe in the early 19th century, it and North America and Japan have demonstrated an entirely more productive society anchored on the Industrial Revolution and democratization. The Third World is usually viewed, and correctly, as being backward because its economies are not productive the way that those of the so-called developed countries are; life expectancy is lower, and social justice is less.

But this was not an eternal situation; it was the result of complex breakthroughs that took place in the nineteenth century in a few countries, joined more recently by a few more. Before that breakthrough, there was little difference between large continental regions.

So, modern scholarship with regards to Africa suffers from a double blindness with regards to the Atlantic World of the 17th or 18th centuries. On the one hand, Europe gets more credit for being developed than it warrants, and African gets less credit that it deserves. And thus, a non-existent gap appears in the way the two regions’ interactions are understood.

Once we get past 1840 or so, the situation does become one of unequal development both in economic and political manners, and in this case some of the ideas make more sense. But we are also seeing that the gap between the First and Third Worlds is changing.

INTERVIEWERS – Paradoxically, isn’t it a contradiction that part of the historiography highlights, for instance, the lack of European political and cultural dominion over pre-colonial Africa, while at the same time attributes emphatically to modern European colonization the transformations in the continent? In short, Europeans would have been unable to dominate, and yet able of transforming pre-colonial African societies. Is it the result of the force of a market society in a pre-industrial world or simply a historiographical contradiction?

JOHN THORNTON – I have not really engaged seriously with colonial or post-colonial Africa as a scholar, though through travel and sometimes teaching I have ideas about it. I don't think that Europe greatly modified African society during the colonial period. I am of the opinion that the African state builders of the 19th century, Samori and al-Hajj 'Umar in the Sudan, the Sokoto Caliphate, Dahomey or Asante in West Africa, or the Lunda empire, Msiri and others would probably have ended up doing what the Europeans ended up doing. They would have mobilized export crop and mineral production, built railroads and other infrastructure (using capital and expertise from Europe), and they probably would have used forced labor and experimented in some of the abusive behavior that happened in the colonial period. In this regard, they would have followed a trajectory not too much unlike Latin America or South Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries.

But African leaders would also probably have developed their own cultures their own way, developed their own sense of cultural identity including education and training. We can see that Ethiopia, which did not experience a colonial period, did the sort of things that Europeans did, and it is not substantially worse off than other African countries. Not necessarily any better, but no worse. Of course, I'm stating counter-factual history and in that field, every opinion is as defensible as any other one.

INTERVIEWERS – You have a wide readership in Brazil, particularly after the translation of *Africa and Africans in the making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680*. Currently, the field of African History in our country is in full bloom, including its historiography. From your experience in Brazil and/or with Brazilian scholars, which impression do you have about the studies of African History here? Do you think that, once detached from the colonized *versus* colonized dichotomy regarding the History of Africa, Brazilian historians can open up new fields of research? What contribution could Brazilian historians, among others, provide within a context of internationalized historiography? Do historians in the US or elsewhere are aware of the production on African history made in Brazil and/or by Brazilians historians? Or is Portuguese too big a language barrier?

JOHN THORNTON – One can't help but be impressed with the growth of African Studies in Brazil! When I first visited in 1998 there was just very little being done, and now there is so much. It is thanks to Brazil recognizing its African heritage and wishing to understand it.

Right now, Brazilian Africanists are working a lot on the African heritage of Brazil, which means a focus that leans heavily on Angola and what was called the Costa da Mina, which is where most Afro-Brazilians came from. In Angola the work fits in many ways a model established in Brazilian historiography of Brazil's own past. There is a focus on social history and thus a close reading of the kinds of documentation that social history requires. Frequently that is the portion that deals with the colonial portions of Africa, and



particularly Angola. I would like to see that become a bit more diversified, as I can see it is moving that way more recently. This might mean that Brazilians would deal with Senegal, or with the Gold Coast, and not just Guinea-Bissau or Benin.

I think that Brazilian historiography of Africa will have to appear in English to make a serious international impact. I see that in the work that has appeared in translation, where Brazilian Africanists like Roquinaldo Ferreira or Mariana Candido are being recognized and cited precisely because a lot of their work is appearing in English. I would support producing English language translations of some of the work being done in Brazil for that reason, since it will then resonate not just in the US but internationally. English, for better or worse, has become the lingua franca of the world, and Portuguese is perceived as a barrier.

INTERVIEWERS – There are many sources in Portuguese on slave trade and slavery in the South Atlantic, as such enslavement in the Central Africa, and others, for the African pre-colonial period. However, the sources would be almost exclusively the domain of Portuguese native speakers, partially due to the lack of Portuguese fluency among scholars from other countries. In this sense, how can Brazilian historians help to advance the field? Conversely, what have been our gaps and shortcomings?

JOHN THORNTON – Portuguese is more a mental barrier than a real one. Anyone who knows French and one other Latin language can read all the rest of them. And if one wants to read Portuguese, just learn Spanish which is easy to do in the US particularly. On the printed page, Spanish and Portuguese are the same language (as is Catalan and more or less even Italian). I have had students who are native Spanish speakers come to me and say they can't read Portuguese, and I tell them, "no you can't understand Portuguese when it is spoken, you can read it" and they come back, amazed and say, yes, I can read it just fine. We all know this problem; I don't have to elaborate further!

Having said that, though, certainly having Portuguese as a native language is a step up for anyone doing African history, particularly for the period before 1700 and especially for Angola. And quite probably more people, whether Brazilian, Portuguese, Angolan or Mozambican, using Portuguese will help to publicize the utility of these sources.

Of course, if you want to close lacunae, it's important to move away from only using Portuguese sources. It is impossible to do much of Africa with only Portuguese sources. When I wrote my first book on Kongo, most of my source material was in Italian, and for the history of Angola it's good to know Dutch as well. For the later periods, post 1850, German is essential.

If you are serious about doing the Costa da Mina, you cannot avoid Dutch and for the Gold coast, Danish is also critical. This is the problem for African history, the

language demands are crushing, but this is where progress can be made. Over the years, I have developed working knowledge of all those European languages.

INTERVIEWERS – Internationalization of historiography is done mostly in English. Themes such as the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on pre-colonial Africa, particularly within Africanist historiography (i.e., history written outside Africa) are classic. Currently, however, there has been an emphasis on war and enslavement, judicial processes and enslavement, frontiers and enslavement, gender, personal and/or family trajectories etc. Where do you see the field is going, considering these new trends? What do you see as geographic and temporal gaps?

JOHN THORNTON – One of the things that has happened since I studied Africa in graduate school was the diminution of the study of African affairs as African affairs. In the 1970s, partly because of the role of anthropology as a discipline in forming African history, we focused on topics like internal governance, economic of inland trade between African countries, social structures and the like. This was African history for Africa so to speak.

But as the specific interest in early African history declined, and many or even most people interested in Africa focused on modern and even contemporary periods, the field became more and more focused on the slave trade. This was, I think, simply because it was the slave trade that made Africa important in the history of the Americas. This was partly the reason why I wrote *Africa and Africans* because I perceived that the coming interest in Africa was going to be led by people whose primary interest was in the history of the Americas, and wanted to include Africa as a part of that.

Should we return to a golden age of early African history, we would, I imagine take up some of the fields that are currently in vogue among the historians of Europe or the Americas, including gender, frontier studies, personal histories and so on. There will, however, be the problem that primary source material that makes that sort of study possible is lacking in many parts of Africa. It was to pursue the kinds of issues that were popular in European historiography that I chose to study Kongo because it had the sort of material, I needed to write that.

Of course, one can pursue oral sources, and this is what a fair number of historians have done. But here there are two problems, the first is that it requires acquisition of at least one and potentially multiple African languages, and the capacity to do field work, which is harder to do in Africa now than it was in the 70s, at least in many countries.

However, even here, one cannot expect to achieve much time depth using oral traditions or interviewing. The optimism that once prevailed in African studies that oral tradition would allow to make up for the lack of documents has largely faded and one can only



say that an elder's description of past times taken down in 2019 represents anything more ancient than 1900 is probably mistaken.

INTERVIEWERS – Your publications contributed substantially to the advancement of West Central African studies before 1800. We would like you to talk a little bit about your current experiences as a teacher and researcher as well as about your future research projects in History of Africa.

JOHN THORNTON – I have just finished a book that is a general history of west Central Africa before 1852 (the death of Naweji II, Lunda emperor). West Central Africa in this definition is the Congo basin plus the central highlands of Angola. It is quite long and scholarly in the sense that I wrote it largely from primary sources and with all the current scholarship considered. I don't see it as a textbook, but as a general history. There are many new discoveries in it and a good number, I think, of insights. I'm excited about it, and it should appear in print perhaps in 2020. Maybe sooner, depending on Cambridge University Press and my capacity to respond to their requests.

My next project remains with West Central Africa, as outlined earlier, a biography of Afonso I of Kongo. This project will include English translations of all Afonso's correspondence, with appropriate annotation. The book will appear in a series designed for teaching undergraduate students, so it won't have all the technical apparatus of an edition, and the biography will (hopefully) be accessible to my audience.

I am presently teaching a course called the History of Religion in Africa and have been preparing a course text out of my lecture notes. This is written up, as usual for me, directly from primary sources and includes the whole continent. Some day that might be published, we'll see.

INTERVIEWERS – What advice would you give to students who wish to study the history of Africa?

JOHN THORNTON – Two words: learn languages! Steel yourself to this prospect and consider it a hazard of the trade.

While saying that, I would also say learn at least one African language, perhaps the one of the regions you are studying. I did not use any Kikongo language sources in writing my dissertation (I could only speak Hausa and Kiswahili), and I'm not sure that it would have made a difference in its overall appearance had I learned it. But once I did learn Kikongo, I simply felt that I knew the place better than before. Eventually, as it happens, I have discovered a few (quite a few, actually) sources written in Kikongo which have proven helpful in doing more recent periods. And it allowed me to translate Beatriz Kimpa Vita's

sermon into Kikongo in my biography of her, which I think supplied real if not very visible depth to the work.

I would also think to include that one should also learn about regions other than Africa and to read widely in history and in disciplines other than history. When I set out to do graduate study in history, I decided that my thesis would be fixed by an intersection between the entire history of Kongo and the history of the world in the period I was going to write about. So I read widely about all parts of the world in the 17th century, and I read all about Kongo from the earliest excavations to the present day.

INTERVIEWERS – Professor, we are very grateful for your time and attention. Thank you very much!

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