Cardinal Directions

Africa's Shifting Place in Early Modern European Conceptions of the World

Le sens de l'orientation. Le changement de place de l'Afrique dans les premières conceptions européennes modernes du monde

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- 1 Early modern representations of Africa and Africans have generally been categorized as negative in the scholarly literature (Cohen 1980; Eze 1997; Marshall & Glynwyr 1982; Mudimbe 1994). Others have taken a more nuanced view, suggesting that the consistent disparagement of Africans emerged somewhat later, above all in the late eighteenth and especially in the nineteenth centuries (Curtin 1965). Negative stereotypes have alternatively been attributed to imperialism and the need to assert European superiority over the peoples they dominated; to the Atlantic slave trade, in an attempt to categorize the victims as in some way sub- or imperfectly human; or as an enduring feature of dualist European thought ever since classical antiquity, requiring alien and inferior African "others" as complements to Europe's image of itself. All of these seemingly contradictory approaches seek to pinpoint the origins of contemporary European (and North American) racism. However praiseworthy the enterprise, it necessarily suffers from a presentist bias, seeking to understand the roots of modern attitudes rather than to comprehend earlier representations of Africans in their own terms. For this reason, such arguments focus too exclusively on representations of Africans, an approach which, however much intuitive sense it might make, is ultimately limiting. After all, early modern Europeans were not for the most part specifically interested in Africans. (Indeed, some authors point, rightly or wrongly, to the relative paucity of writings about Africa). Rather, they were concerned with the world as a whole and with Europe's place within it. In other words, the best way to categorize the ways in which early modern Europeans understood Africa is to examine how they represented the world as a whole.
- 2 Indeed, early modern European representations of the world were often implicitly if not explicitly organized in terms of directionality, either along a north/south or an

east/west axis. In the sixteenth century, the north/south axis clearly predominated, and while it continued to provide a powerful organizing paradigm through the eighteenth century, it came to be displaced by the east/west axis, associated with somewhat different values. If Africa's position along the north/south axis was relatively obvious (although never entirely free from ambiguity), its position along the east-west axis was essentially undetermined.

- 3 The valences of the north/south axis derived from Greek climatology, originally associated with medical writings attributed to Hippocrates and later adapted by Aristotle¹.
- 4 Hippocratic medicine was above all concerned with the effects of cold and heat on the humors. A cold and wet climate ostensibly stimulated the generation of internal heat and dryness within the human body, whereas a hot and dry had the opposite effect. Cold and heat were, of course, broadly associated with north and south, at least in the northern hemisphere. Such a scheme was easily adapted to Aristotelian thought, with its consistent emphasis on the superiority of the middle; temperate climates, neither too hot nor too cold, were ideal for the health of both mind and body. The weakness of such schemes is that it is not self-evident which climate constitutes the just mean. Generally, a temperate climate corresponds rather suspiciously to the climate of the country from which any particular author stems.
- 5 This is certainly the case for Jean Bodin, the sixteenth century thinker who most consistently applied the Hippocratic theory of humors to the description of the world, particularly in his *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History* in 1565². Bodin used the hot/cold distinction to elaborate a characteriology. The internal heat generated by inhabitants of cold climates stimulated the growth of the body. As a result, northerners were large, strong, courageous, mechanically gifted, and capable of drinking large quantities of alcohol. However, as the mind developed in inverse proportion to the body, they were not very intelligent. Southerners were the opposite of northerners: small, weak, pusillanimous, and relatively incapable of handling strong drink. On the other hand, they were clever, sometimes too clever for their own good, given to underhanded plotting. Residents of temperate zones such as France (hardly by coincidence!) were best fitted to rule, as they were intelligent enough to devise wise plans and strong enough to execute them properly. It is important to point out that Bodin's scheme, however Gallocentric, was not nearly as radically Eurocentric as later formulations of such a climatic scheme. For example, Montesquieu, who made similar use of climatic distinctions two centuries later, argued that Europe alone was climatically suited for republican and monarchical forms of government, relegating the entire non-European world to the undesirable realm of despotism. Bodin, on the other hand, readily admitted Turkey, Persia, and China into the temperate zone. Rather, Bodin's schema was no doubt devised to demarcate France from its Hapsburg rivals, either "cold" (Austria) or "hot" (Spain). He was particularly contemptuous of the pretensions of the Holy Roman Empire:

"[...] what has Germany to oppose to the sultan of the Turks? Or which state can more aptly be called a monarchy? This fact is obvious to everyone—if there is anywhere in the world any majesty of empire and of true monarchy, it must radiate from the sultan. He owns the richest parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe, and he rules far and wide over the entire Mediterranean and all but a few of its islands [...]. I shall not discuss the prince of Ethiopia, called by his people Jochan Bellul, that is, precious gem, whose empire is little less than all Europe. What of the emperor of

the Tartars, who rules tribes barbarous in their savagery, countless in number, unconquered in strength? If you compare Germany with these, you compare a fly to an elephant".(Bodin 1945: 292-93)

- 6 Moreover, the distinction between hot and cold in Bodin's thought actually operated in favor of hot as opposed to cold climates, given his assertion of the superiority of the mind over the body:

"[...] the southern people, through continued zeal for contemplation [...], have been promoters and leaders of the highest learning. They have revealed the secrets of nature; they have discovered the mathematical disciplines; finally, they first observed the nature and the power of religion and the celestial [...] it should not seem strange to those who have read history that the ablest philosophers, mathematicians, prophets, and finally all religions in the world have poured forth from those regions as from the most plenteous spring".(ibid.: 111-113)

- 7 Africa was definitely within the purview of Bodin's "south", based particularly on his reading of Leo Africanus' travels in North and West Africa as well as the Jesuit Francisco Alvares' account of his embassy to the Abyssinian court in 1520. Bodin was particularly impressed with the religiosity of Africans, noting with approval the large number of "temples" (i.e., mosques) in Fez; as for Ethiopia, he was struck by reports of "the infinite number of monks, who walk around, not only in isolated areas but also in the countryside, in crowds, in the market place, and in the camps", not to mention the "fasts of the whole people that are plainly incredible if anyone compares them with ours" (ibid.: 114).
- 8 Bodin's relatively favorable representation of Africa demonstrates that an orientation around the north/ south axis did not inevitably condemn Africans to an inferior status. However, in the following centuries, Bodin's polar opposition between "hot" and "cold" was transposed to an opposition between "extreme" and "temperate" climates. Denizens of regions which were either too hot or too cold were in fundamental respects incomplete humans, ones whose full human potential was not realized. This was, for example, the case stated in Fontenelle's famous "Digression sur les anciens et les modernes". Paradoxically, Fontenelle's (1994: 33) essay was devoted to the assertion of the uniformity of human nature over space and time: "[...] il s'ensuit que la différence des climats ne doit être comptée pour rien [...]", that is, except in extreme climates: "Tout au plus on pourrait croire que la zone torride et les deux glaciales ne sont pas fort propres pour les sciences. Jusqu'à présent elles n'ont point passé l'Égypte et la Mauritanie d'un côté, et de l'autre la Suède; peut-être n'est-ce pas par hasard qu'elles se sont tenues entre le mont Atlas et la mer Baltique: on ne sait si ce ne sont point là les bornes que la nature leur a posées, et si l'on peut espérer de voir jamais de grands auteurs lapons ou nègres." Fontenelle's mention of Africans in the same breath as Laplanders was by no means exceptional. For instance, an English essayist made these remarks in 1713: "Nor is the Disagreement between the basest Individuals of our species and the Ape or Monkey so great, but that, were the latter endow'd with the Faculty of Speech, they might perhaps as justly claim the Rank and dignity of the human Race, as the savage Hotentot, or the stupid native of Nova Zembla" (Cited in Lovejoy 1936: 234). In short, inhabitants of the far north and the far south were barely distinguishable from animals.
- 9 The mention of the so-called "Hottentots", natives of the Cape of Good Hope, reveals the extent to which the polarity between north and south could symbolically overshadow the original contrast between hot and cold. Bodin, as it happens, was well

aware that the valence of directionality was reversed on the other side of the equator, where north was associated with heat and south with cold. However, the “Hottentots”, inhabitants of the southernmost tip of a southernly continent, were seemingly condemned to represent the inconvenience of living too far to the south. As aptly remarked in Thomas Astley’s *New General Collection of Voyages and Travels* (which were translated into French by the Abbé Prévost in his own anthology of travel narratives): “There is scarce any Place in the World more frequently described in Books of Voyages than the Cape of Good Hope, because all Ships must pass, and frequently touch at it, on their way to the East Indies” (Astley 1968 III: 322). Descriptions of the Cape and its indigenous inhabitants were so commonplace in descriptions of travel to Asia, that Simon de la Loubère, ambassador of Louis XIV to the court of Siam, included a description of the Cape as an appendix to his authoritative *Du royaume de Siam* in 1691. The colonization of the Cape by the Dutch in 1652 greatly contributed to the representation of the “Hottentots” as marginally human³. Not surprisingly, the Dutch were annoyed at the Khoi’s transparent lack of enthusiasm for their incorporation into the lowest rung of the Cape’s economy. Unless coerced, they would work for wages only long enough to obtain the goods they desired, notably alcohol and tobacco.

- 10 However, the Dutch stereotypes went far beyond the mere accusation of indolence. The “Hottentots” allegedly gave off a rancid smell because they smeared themselves with fat and soot. They ate their meat, especially the entrails of their sheep, poorly cleaned and barely cooked. The women would even wear such entrails wound around their wrists and ankles, snacking on their jewelry when they felt hungry. The bestial proclivities of these people extended to their genitals, either naturally in the case of women, who were alleged to have a sort of natural apron covering their pudenda; or culturally in the case of men, who supposedly cut off one testicle to allow themselves to run faster and unimpeded in the pursuit of game. French and British travelers who stopped for a few days at the Cape on their way to or from Asia, and who interacted with the indigenous Khoi only in the most superficial manner, relayed such denigrating Dutch representations, often uncritically, though occasionally injecting a salutary note of skepticism. The most notable exception was the Prussian Peter Kolb (or Kolbe or Kolben), who was sent to the Cape in 1705 to make astronomical observations, where he remained until 1713. The fruit of his voyage was a two-volume account of the Cape (Kolb 1738), the first devoted to the “Hottentots” and the second to the local flora and fauna. No only did Kolb have more time to observe the “Hottentots” first hand; more important, perhaps, his strained relations with the Dutch predisposed him in favor of the indigenes.
- 11 Kolb notwithstanding, the symbolic power of the north/south axis and its associated notion that inhabitants of the extreme north and the extreme south were less than fully human constituted a schema into which the unflattering Dutch portrayal of the “Hottentots” fitted seamlessly. However, it would be a serious mistake to assume that such representations are necessarily typical of all images of Africans. For example, the British chaplain John Ovington, in his account of his journey to Surat in 1689 (Ovington 1976), furnishes a particularly repulsive depiction of the “Hottentots” but also far more balanced and less pejorative accounts of other Africans encountered in the course of his voyage.
- 12 Even in the sixteenth century, the north/south axis was supplemented by a polarity between east and west. For Bodin, east and west tended to echo the directionality of

north and south. Eastern nations were more like southern ones, bearing in mind that, for him, this involved the predominance of the mind over the body. On the other hand, the western inhabitants of the New World were brutish barbarians, physically strong and unintelligent, über-Germans of sorts. One finds a similar tortuous logic in a letter from the French historian Henri de la Popelinière to his Dutch colleague Joseph Scaliger in 1604⁴. Because the sun rises in the east, the east is earlier exposed to the sun's rays, and consequently with the qualities of light and heat associated with the south.

- 13 In the course of the seventeenth century, this east/west polarity was progressively disembedded from the north/south axis and gained a very different salience of its own. The era witnessed a phenomenal explosion in the production and consumption of travel literature, especially to Asia but also to the New World, as European powers competed fiercely for the control of the expanding trade in exotic commodities, such as sugar, tea, coffee, tobacco, and furs. Broadly speaking, the “east” was associated with large, centralized empires, notably Turkey, Persia, and China, often (but not always) characterized as “despotic”. The Americas in the “west”, by contrast, were stereotypically peopled by “savages”, the Huron and the Iroquois who were respectively the allies and the nemesis of Jesuit missionaries in seventeenth-century New France. These associations were not, of course, invariable. Asian pastoral nomads—Mongols and Bedouin, for example—were “barbarians”, almost if not quite the equivalent of American “savages”. To the west, the Peruvian empire often served as the American equivalent of China, particularly in the writings of sinophiles such as Voltaire and Quesnay. In any case, the values associated with “eastern” empire and “western” savagery were ambivalent if not mutable. “Savages” could be depicted as free and egalitarian or alternatively as anarchic and vicious models of disorder. Asian empires, most notably China, could either be portrayed as paragons of order and good government or as despotic realms where the entire population was effectively reduced to slavery, catering to the capricious whims of an irresponsible ruler.
- 14 Within such a scheme, the location of African peoples was essentially undetermined. Were they more like American savages or Asian empires? Clearly, the Khoi peoples of the Cape of Good Hope, already condemned by their southern location, fell clearly within the “savage” pole. Even the “Hottentots”, despite their more habitual portrayal as degenerate specimens of humanity⁵, were occasionally cast as *bons sauvages*, especially by Peter Kolb, as noted above. While his depiction is by no means uniformly flattering—he echoes Dutch complaints about their endemic laziness and drunkenness—he dwells for pages on their hospitality and generosity: “[...] the brightest thing on the virtuous side of the Hottentot character is their mutual affection. They are certainly the most friendly, the most liberal, and the most benevolent people to one another that ever appeared upon Earth” (Kolb 1738: 334-335). “To European strangers likewise, as far as I could ever see or learn, the Hottentots are generally extremely hospitable. They are generally moved at the sight of distress in persons of every nation, and generally administer what relief they can and this without any manner of stipulation” (*ibid.*: 337). Kolb proceeds to catalog specific examples, in much detail, of their generosity to one another and to Europeans in need. He concludes a chapter on the vices and virtues of the Hottentots by insisting:

“The integrity of the Hottentots, their strictness and celerity in the execution of justice, and their chastity are things in which they excel all or most other nations in the world. A most beautiful simplicity of manners runs through all the nations of them. And numbers of them have told me, that the vices they saw prevail among

Christians; their avarice, their envy and hatred of one another, their restless discontented tempers, their lasciviousness and injustice were the things that principally kept the Hottentots from hearkening to Christianity".(ibid.: 339)

- 15 Kolb's judgment was echoed even more forcefully and polemically in Raynal's *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les Deux Indes*, in a long passage which is no doubt mostly the work of Diderot rather than Raynal⁶. Indeed, it epitomizes Diderot's fundamental ambivalence about savagery, a mixture of admiration tinted with repulsion:

"[...] des cabanes couvertes de peaux, dans lesquelles on n'entre qu'en rampant, et qui sont distribuées sur une ligne circulaire, composent leurs bourgades. Ces huttes ne servent guère qu'à serrer quelques denrées, quelques ustensiles de ménage. Hors le temps des pluies, l'Hottentot n'y entre jamais. On le voit toujours couché à sa porte. C'est là qu'aussi peu touché de l'avenir que du passé, il dort, il fume, il s'enivre.

La conduite des bestiaux est l'unique occupation de ces sauvages. Comme il n'y a qu'un troupeau pour chaque village, et qu'il est commun à tous, chacun est chargé de le garder à son tour [...].

Les Hottentots n'ayant ni richesses, ni signes de richesses, et leurs moutons qui sont tout leur bien étant en commun, il doit y avoir parmi eux peu de sujets de division [...]. Aussi sont-ils unis entr'eux par les liens d'une concorde inaltérable [...].

Ils sont, comme tous les peuples pasteurs, remplis de bienveillance; et ils tiennent quelque chose de la malpropreté, de la stupidité des animaux qu'ils conduisent".

(Raynal 1783-1784, vol 1: 236-237)

- 16 As for their language, "C'est une espèce de ramage, composé de sifflements et de sons bizarres, qui n'ont presque point de rapport avec les nôtres" (*ibid.*). The comment underscores the bestial side of their nature, the uncleanness and stupidity which they allegedly share with their animals. Yet Raynal/Diderot also emphasized their "primitive communism" and how this fostered their values of harmony, hospitality, and above all, perhaps, equality.

- 17 In any case, the passage finishes with a diatribe which contrasts the virtues and vices of the Hottentot with those of Europeans:

"Mais sont-ils heureux, me demanderez-vous? Et moi je vous demanderai quel est l'homme si entêté des avantages de nos sociétés, si étranger à nos peines, qui ne soit quelquefois retourné par la pensée au milieu des forêts, et qui n'ait du moins envié le Bonheur, l'innocence et le repos de la vie patriarcale? Eh bien! Cette vie est celle de l'Hottentot. Aimez-vous la liberté? Il est libre. Aimez-vous la santé? Il ne connaît d'autre maladie que la vieillesse. Aimez-vous la vertu? Il a des penchants qu'il satisfait sans remords; mais il n'a point de vices. Je sais bien que vous vous éloignerez avec dégoût d'un homme emmaillotté, pour ainsi dire, dans les entrailles des animaux. Croyez-vous donc que la corruption dans laquelle vous êtes plongés, vos haines, vos perfidies, votre duplicité ne révoltent pas plus ma raison que la malpropreté de l'Hottentot ne révolte mes sens"?(*ibid.*: 239)

- 18 Still, when all is said and done, Diderot's moral revulsion for civilization does not quite eradicate his physical revulsion for the Hottentots.

- 19 Indeed, Diderot finishes the passage with a polemic against colonial conquest that directly echoes the passage from the *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* where the old Tahitian apostrophizes the departing Frenchmen:

"Encore si, lorsque vous avez abordé sur ses rivages, vous vous étiez proposé de l'amener à une vie plus polie, à des mœurs qui vous paraissaient préférables aux siennes, on vous excuserait. Mais vous êtes descendus dans son pays pour l'en dépouiller. Vous ne vous êtes approchés de sa cabane que pour l'en chasser, que

pour le substituer, si vous le pouviez, à l'animal qui laboure sous le fouet de l'agriculteur, que pour achever de l'abrutir, que pour satisfaire votre cupidité. Fuyez, malheureux Hottentots, fuyez! Enfoncez-vous dans vos forêts! Les bêtes féroces qui les habitent sont moins redoutables que les monstres sous l'empire desquels vous allez tomber. Le tigre vous déchirera peut-être; mais il ne vous ôtera que la vie. L'autre vous ravira l'innocence et la liberté. Ou, si vous vous en sentez le courage, prenez vos haches, tendez vos arcs, faites pleuvoir sur ces étrangers vos flèches empoisonnées. Puisse-t-il n'en rester aucun pour porter à leurs concitoyens la nouvelle de leur défaite".(ibid.: 240)

- 20 In fact, Diderot's contribution to Raynal's encyclopedic work were roughly contemporary to his drafting and later revision of the *Supplément*, and so it is hardly surprising that the tone and the substance of the one were reflected in the other. His brief stint as a prisoner in the Château de Vincennes after the publication of the *Lettre sur les aveugles* left Diderot unwilling to publish any text as incendiary as the *Supplément*, at least under his own name; his collaboration with Raynal allowed him to publish a similar text under someone else's. Thus the Hottentots became, in some but not quite all respects, the functional equivalent of Tahitians as savage foils to European would-be conquerors. The Tahitians, after all, were beautiful savages, the Hottentots repulsive ones, yet nonetheless embodiments of liberty, equality, and fraternity if not intelligence and sophistication.
- 21 However, Africans were not necessarily depicted as in any way savages, especially in literary representations. La Fontaine's fable, "Les deux amis" (La Fontaine 1708: 194-195), begins with the line "Deux vrais amis vivaient au Monomotapa"—Monomotapa being the European rendition of the southern African kingdom of Mwana Mtapa. The two friends are exemplary: "Les amis de ce pays-là/ Valent bien dit-on ceux du nôtre." When, in the middle of the night, one friend runs in distress to the others' abode, the second proposes his purse, his sword, indeed his slave girl to fulfill whatever needs he might have, whereas the first had simply dreamt that his friend was indisposed and rushed over to make sure that this was not the case. One cannot help but noting, like Sherlock Holmes of the dog who did not bark, the near total absence of any distinguishing "African" characteristics of the friends in the fable, other than perhaps the passing reference to a slave girl for one's bed, a detail which arguably was meant to evoke the Orient as much as Africa. Admittedly, the story which raises without answering the question of whom was the better friend falls into the category of "dilemma tales", a rather common genre in African folklore, but it is highly unlikely that La Fontaine would have been even remotely aware of the fact. Clearly, the name "Monopotapa" was chosen for the way it scanned in the opening line, and for its capacity to stand for a generic exotic location. Even so, the fact that an African kingdom could be chosen as generically exotic, without the slightest hint of deprecation, is a clear indication that representations of Africans, however unreal, were not necessarily derogatory, nor evocative of savagery for better or worse.
- 22 The specific identification of Africa with the Orient emerges more clearly in Diderot's erotic novel, "Les Bijoux indiscrets" (1962). The genre of the Orientalizing erotic novel with satirical and political overtones had been pioneered by Crébillon Fils in 1734 with *Tanzai et Néardané*. Diderot's novel is set, not in the Orient, but rather ostensibly the Congo. This is a Congo, however, where Brahmins worship Pagodas in the Great Mosque, thus practicing a confusingly generic Eastern religion. Indeed, the principal protagonists of the novel are Mangogul and Mirzoza, rather transparently representing Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour. The king and his paramour are treated rather

gently and respectfully, perhaps more so than in Crbillon Fils; the principal targets of ridicule are the academic and clerical establishment, and above all the sexual appetites of women of the court. It is the play of displacements, with French royalty depicted in Oriental garb situated in Africa, which indicates a sort of equivalence between France, Asia, and Africa. Admittedly, this Africa is extravagantly imaginary, but not perhaps more so than an Africa populated by savages which is simply more familiar to the modern reader. In any case, the book was in no way intended as radically (or even mildly) subversive. Diderot was already involved in the project of compiling the *Encyclopdie*, a project for which he depended on Madame de Pompadour's patronage and, at the very least, the King's tacit approval. The fact that he could depict them as Africans (even a very unreal sort of African) without giving undue offense is striking. A century later, Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado* could depict Victorian England in the guise of an imaginary Japan; and imaginary Africa would have been absolutely unthinkable.

- 23 The amalgamation of Africa and the Orient was not restricted to France. The eponymous hero of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1749) is an Abyssinian prince as his name would suggest. In fact, Dr. Johnson's literary career had begun with an English translation of a French translation of the Portuguese Jesuit Jeronimo Lobo's travels to Abyssinia. Although the translation was a commission, Johnson was clearly quite taken with Lobo's description, noting in his preface that "the nations here described [are neither] devoid of all sense of Humanity, or consummate in all private and social Virtues, here are no Hottentots without Religion, Polity, or Articulate Language, no Chinese perfectly Polite, and completely skill'd in all Sciences" (Lobo 1735: viii). In Johnson's philosophical novel, the young prince Rasselas, who has grown up in the Happy Valley, develops to his tutor's dismay a hankering to broaden his education by seeing the world. He travels to Egypt, contemplates the Pyramids, and suffers various misadventures before coming to the conclusion that there is no place like home—at least, if home is the Happy Valley. Rasselas' journey to Egypt is, of course, a version of the Grand Tour, the quasi-obligatory visit of wealthy young Englishmen to the memorable sights of continental Europe. The novel itself, intended not only to rival but to outdo Voltaire's philosophical stories, indirectly proclaims the superiority of Britain to the Continent. In any case, whatever local color one may find in the novel is restricted to Egypt, not only in the pyramids but, more menacingly, in its infestation of marauding bandits all too ready to prey on gullible foreigners. There is nothing particularly African, even Ethiopian, in the Happy Valley, despite Johnson's familiarity with Lobo's description. Even so, the fact that Ethiopia might, even metaphorically, stand for England is of no little significance.
- 24 This is not to imply that the assimilation of Africa to a generic Orient was invariably flattering. Throughout the eighteenth century, Asian societies had their impassioned detractors—Montesquieu most notably—as well as advocates such as Voltaire and Quesnay. Indeed, both critiques and defenses of Asian societies were means of implicitly commenting on European political regimes. The possible inclusion of Africa (in part if not as a whole) within the broad Asian rubric represented another, quite different mode of misunderstanding Africa than the savage stereotype.
- 25 These various ways of conceptualizing the world, in terms of the north/south as opposed to the east/ west axis; or of representing Africans as degenerate (or less often noble) savages or as virtual Orientals; were not entirely incompatible. Indeed, Buffon's treatise on "Variations dans l'espece humaine" (1747: 168-373), by combining a north/

south and an east/west orientation, highlights the ambiguities in the Enlightenment perception and characterization of Africans as compared with other peoples of the world. The parameters of Buffon's racial classification were three-fold: "La première et la plus remarquable de ces variétés est celle de la couleur. La seconde est celle de la forme et de la grandeur, et la troisième est celle du naturel des différents peuples [...]" (*ibid.*: 166). The underlying causes of this variation were equally triple: "[...] la première est l'influence du climat; la seconde, qui tient beaucoup à la première, est la norriture; et la troisième, qui tient peut-être encore plus à la première et à la seconde, sont les mœurs" (*ibid.*: 219).

- 26 The scheme is remarkable in the way in which it combines the natural and the cultural. The most symptomatic index of this amalgamation is the concept of "le naturel", in other words "character" or "disposition", features which seem to fall eminently within the cultural domain but which the very term itself naturalizes. At the same time, not only climate and diet but also "mœurs", customs, are literally presumed to have somatic consequences for the racialization of the human species: "En supposant [...] deux différents peuples sous un même climat, on peut croire que les hommes de la nation sauvage soient plus basanés, plus laids, plus petits, plus ridés que ceux de la nation policée" (*ibid.*).
- 27 As this passage suggests, European "whiteness" is the standard by which Buffon judges all other peoples, and that it is variation *from* this putative norm, rather than variation *per se*, that must be explained. Given the prominence which he accords climate in accounting for such departures from the standard, it is not surprising that he attributes the blackness of Africans (among others) to the tropical heat. Of course, as a man of science, Buffon does not simply equate "south" with heat, but is well aware that the directions are reversed south of the Equator. Indeed, he cites the lighter skin color of the "Hottentots" as evidence that more temperate climates are conducive to (relative) "whiteness". He even goes so far as to suggest that, over several generations, the skin color of persons of African descent living in Europe will gradually lighten.
- 28 In any case, Buffon's reliance on climate and the north/south axis is most egregiously apparent, not in his depiction of Africans, but instead of "northern" peoples, specifically the inhabitants of Arctic regions,

"[...] une race d'hommes de petite stature, d'une figure bizarre, dont la physionomie est aussi sauvage que les mœurs. Ces hommes [...] paroissent avoir dégénéré de l'espèce humaine". (*ibid.*: 166)
- 29 For whatever reason, Arctic peoples seem to have inspired an extreme disgust in Buffon:

"Non seulement ces peuples se ressemblent par la laideur, la petitesse de la taille, la couleur des cheveux et des yeux, mais ils ont aussi tous à peu près les mêmes inclinations et les mêmes mœurs; ils sont tous également grossiers, superstitieux, stupides [...]. Ils n'ont, pour ainsi dire, aucune idée de religion ni d'un Être supreme; la plupart sont idolâtres, et tous sont très superstitieux; ils sont plus grossiers que sauvages, sans courage, sans respect pour soi-même, sans pudeur; ce peuple abject n'a de mœurs qu'assez pour être méprisé". (*ibid.*: 170-171)
- 30 This depiction of "northerners" as the exemplars of degenerate humanity cannot mechanistically be explained away as an artifact of the slave trade or of colonial domination. The racial imaginary of the mid-eighteenth century was clearly not as fixed as it would become by the next century.

- 31 Buffon, unlike some of his predecessors, did not equate the effects of extreme cold and extreme heat, in order to suggest that Africans in general (or “Hottentots” in particular) were in some way the “southern” equivalents of putatively degenerate denizens of the far north. Instead, curiously enough, he was to switch to a focus on the east/west axis, finding in American “savages” the nearest equivalent to Arctic peoples. He characterized Americans as remarkably uniform, racially and culturally:

“Il me paroit que la raison de cette uniformité dans les hommes de l’Amérique vient de ce qu’ils vivent tous de la même façon; tous les Américains naturels étoient, ou sont encore sauvages ou presque sauvages; les Mexicains et les Péruviens étoient si nouvellement policés, qu’ils ne doivent pas faire une exception”.(ibid.: 261)

- 32 (Buffon’s characterization of Mexico and Peru is, of course, very mistaken, but not unfounded; the Aztec and Inca empires were, in fact, relatively recent formations, although they built on much older traditions of political centralization). This very uniformity is a theoretical problem for Buffon, as it seems to refute his thesis that race is an epiphenomenon of climate. His solution is to suggest that the “New World” is new in every sense of the word, that it was only recently peopled and that, as a consequence, there was not enough time for the climate to change the bodily form of its inhabitants.

- 33 He deliberately contrasts this vision of a uniform (and uniformly “savage”) America to an assertion of African diversity:

“Il paroît d’abord, en rassemblant les témoignages des voyageurs, qu’il y a autant de variétés dans la race des noirs que dans celle des blancs; les noirs ont, comme les blancs, leurs Tartares et leurs Circassiens. Ceux de Guinée sont extrêmement laids et ont une odeur insupportable; ceux de Sofala et de Mozambique sont beaux, et n’ont aucune mauvaise odeur. Il est donc nécessaire de diviser les noirs en différentes races, et il me semble qu’on peut les réduire à deux principales: celle des Nègres et celle des Cafres”.(ibid.: 224)

- 34 Granted, as Duchet (1995: 260) has pointed out, the typology of Africans in terms of their physical appearance, strength, docility, intelligence, etc., was a typical artifact of the slave trade itself. Moreover, such typologies, of Africans or others, take European superiority for granted, as evidenced by their very capacity to pass unreciprocated judgment over all the others. Still, the role that Buffon’s insistence on this diversity plays within the overall structure of his argument cannot simply be reduced to an artifact of Africa’s role in the slave trade. In this respect, the contrast between his depiction of African and of America is central. African diversity is the product of its ancient settlement, as opposed to the radical newness of the Americas. The very fact that Europeans had relatively easily colonized the Americas and subjugated its inhabitants, whereas Africans had successfully kept them out of the continent’s interior, spoke highly in favor of Africans in Buffon’s scheme. Africa’s unknown interior was not, as it would later become, a token of a blank void which awaited to be filled by a European colonial presence, but rather a proof of an active capacity to resist which was worthy of admiration in its own right. However, the very qualities which demonstrated the superiority of Africans over Americans—African industry and discipline compared to American indolence and anarchic freedom—were also those which made good slaves of Africans, as opposed to Americans.

- 35 Ultimately, the idea of African diversity could contribute to a radical indeterminacy. Africans could be recalcitrant savages or (at least relatively) civilized; hideous or handsome; brutish or clever; etc. They were not even lumped together into a single

“race”. If, compared to Europeans, they were (for the most part) products of a torrid rather than a temperate climate, they were also, compared to Americans, more like “eastern” Asians than inveterate “savages”.

- 36 It is relatively easy to use Buffon and other contemporary sources to argue that Enlightenment representations of Africans were derogatory, if not egregiously racist. However, if we compare what Europeans wrote about Africans and what they wrote about other peoples, notably Asians and Americans, such a view needs to be nuanced. If, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, Europe had unequivocally demonstrated its dominance over the Americas through conquest and colonization, European hegemony in Asia and indeed Africa (the slave trade notwithstanding) remained far more tentative. In the eighteenth century, it was still possible to depict Europeans—indeed royals—in pseudo-African, not to mention pseudo-Asian garb. It was only in the nineteenth century, when white European domination over the non-European world was completed, that any notion of parity, even in literary imaginations, became inconceivable. In the eighteenth century, representations of Africa (taken in general) were not so much derogatory or sympathetic as indeterminate: Africa was, after all, south of Europe, east of the Americas, and west of Asia, yielding a different bias depending on which imaginary axis and what bias any particular author wished to stress. A century later, these cardinal directions ceased to govern the European imaginary, and Africans were relegated, like the Americans before them, to irrevocable “savagery”.

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NOTES

1. See GLACKEN (1967: 80-115) for an extensive discussion of Hippocratic climatology.
 2. On Bodin's climatology, see GLACKEN (1967: 434-447), HODGEN (1971: 276-83), LESTRINGANT (1993: 253-290).
 3. On representations of the Khoi peoples, see J. M. COETZEE (1988) and R. LAUNAY (2002).
 4. The letter is reproduced in HUPPERT (1970: 194-197).
 5. Most egregiously in the short book penned by the Dutchman Willem ten Rhyne (SCHAPER 1933), who spent some time at the Cape on the way to Batavia.
 6. On Diderot's contribution to Raynal's work, see M. DUCHET (1978).
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RÉSUMÉS

Résumé

Les analyses des premières représentations européennes modernes de l'Afrique du XVI^e au XVIII^e siècle ont trop souvent cherché à définir les origines du racisme européen plutôt que de comprendre ces représentations dans leur propre contexte. En fait, les représentations de l'Afrique et des Africains n'ont souvent été qu'un épiphénomène de la compréhension européenne de leur propre place dans le monde. Au XVI^e siècle, le schéma prédominant était une variante des théories des humeurs et des climats d'Hippocrate. Les régions du monde étaient classées selon un axe nord/sud correspondant aux climats froids et chauds, l'Afrique étant reléguée sans ambiguïté à la zone chaude. Au XVIII^e siècle, un schéma alternatif se concentre sur l'axe est/ouest contrastant entre les empires (sinon le « despotisme ») asiatiques et la « sauvagerie » américaine. La place de l'Afrique dans ce schéma était fondamentalement ambiguë, permettant les représentations des Africains, comme des « sauvages », ou comme des quasi « Asiatiques ».

Abstract

Analyses of early modern European representations of Africa have sought to pinpoint the origins of European racism rather than to understand such representations in their own context. In fact, depictions of Africa and Africans were often an epiphenomenon of European understandings of their own place within the world as a whole. In the sixteenth century, the predominant schema was a variant of Hippocratic theories of humors and climates. Regions of the world were classified in terms of a north/south axis corresponding to cold and hot climates, with Africa unambiguously relegated to the hot zone. The eighteenth century saw the elaboration of an alternative focus on the east/west axis, in terms of a contrast between Asian empires (if not "despotism") and American "savagery". Africa's place within this scheme was fundamentally ambivalent, allowing representations of Africans either as "savages" or as quasi-Asians.

INDEX

Mots-clés : Afrique, climat, géographie, représentations, théorie

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