A Primer for Teaching African History

DESIGN PRINCIPLES
FOR TEACHING HISTORY
A series edited by Antoinette Burton

A PRIMER FOR TEACHING AFRICAN HISTORY

Ten Design Principles

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Cover art and frontispiece: Memory board (*lukasa*), nineteenth century. Artist unknown. Eastern Luba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Wood, beads, nails, cowries. 1997.126. Used by permission of Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University; gift of Marc and Ruth Franklin.

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Introduction

THIS BOOK IS DESIGNED to guide university professors and high school teachers in the process either of building an African history course for the first time or of revising an existing course. It is also intended as a resource for world history instructors who want to integrate Africa more deeply into their courses. I imagine this book as one knot in the tapestry of conversations about curriculum design and course instruction that has been woven within the field of African history since its development. In these pages, I attempt to gather together the strands of these conversations by drawing on work produced over many years by teachers, researchers, and activists and then shared in the form of publications, syllabi, course material, and discussions. In addition to examining the patterns and meaning of these conversations, I have used this primer as a platform to suggest a number of possible points of departure for future work on content, course design, and pedagogy. Most important, however, I tried to assemble a book that will be immediately useful to anyone designing or revising their own courses. The result is not a manifesto. I do not argue for a particular approach to the teaching of the African past. I *do*, however, promote an intentional approach to course design and delivery that is heedful of the wisdom of our peers and conscious of the many opportunities and strategies available to the instructor.

As a guide to course design, this primer is intended to func-

tion not so much like an instruction manual or a compass; instead it is meant to be like a *lukasa*.

The Lukasa

The lukasa is a tool that has historically been used by a large community of Central Africans to help steer their relationship to the past. Historians and other Western scholars tend to group this community under the name Luba (or BaLuba), representing both a linguistic commonality and a kingdom that existed in the east of the modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo from the sixteenth century until the eve of colonialism. However, it is clear that Luba culture and language were historically associated with an area much larger than the Luba state. Some elements, including the lukasa, were adopted even beyond the frontiers of the principal Luba cultural and linguistic package and spread quite widely across Central Africa.[1]

Within Luba communities today, the lukasa is one of many tools for working with the past. Like English, the Luba language has a number of terms for thinking about historical events and experiences, some of which are related to regret or nostalgia, others to litigation, still others to teaching. Some of these terms clearly relate to communal memory, as they are tied to verbs whose meanings indicate discussion and relationships. Others seem to relate to personal attributes, suggesting that certain individuals have particularly good memories or specified roles as historians. A great deal of Luba vocabulary about the past is not spoken, but rather is manifested in physical objects. Thrones, staffs, scepters, necklaces, and even bodies are interpretations of the past, especially when used in ritual and entertainment. However, it is the wooden memory board, or lukasa, that is justifiably the best-known Luba object of historical meaning. The form that the lukasa normally takes is described by the art historian Mary Nooter Roberts and the anthropologist Allen F. Roberts as "a flat, hand-sized wooden object studded with beads and pins, or covered with incised or bas-relief ideograms. During Mbudye rituals, a lukasa is used to teach neophytes sacred lore about culture heroes, clan migrations, and the introduction of sacred rule; to suggest the special positioning of activities and offices within the kingdom or inside a royal compound; and to order different office-holders'

sacred prerogatives concerning contact with earth spirits and the exploitation of natural resources."[2]

For the past several centuries, the lukasa have been largely the proprietary tools of professional Luba historians, the Mbudye court historians. These boards are in part a mnemonic device, meant to prompt memory and maintain the accuracy of stories about the past such as the exploits of heroes, founding of kingdoms, paths of migrations, and political struggles. The arrangement of beads of different colors and sizes and of carved signs in the boards conveys messages for those who can read them, with proximity, order, and design indicating relationships and transformations across space, time, categories, and associations. The lukasa thus functions as a type of historical text. However, the high-level Mbudye historians who read the boards, usually in a public setting, are more than mere reciters of this text. They are also scholars who create the boards and they interpret the meaning encoded within them. As such, these historians do not seek to create a consensus history or espouse a single view of the past. Rather, their interpretive role is facilitated by the fact that lukasa are made in such a way as to permit multiple interpretations, despite sharing a standardized structure and vocabulary.

Although the messages embedded within them are malleable, the lukasa still respond to flows of power within society, often reinforcing the legitimacy of long-standing political dynasties and providing a focal point for community unity. Lukasa readings are shaped by the Mbudye scholars with a particular audience in mind, for they are often arguments for particular points of view or moments for the education of new members of a community. Such readings are often associated with music and dances, and the combined performances may be meant to encourage particular actions, to mourn a leader, or to express celebration and joy within the community.

Because of their beauty, ritual nature, and association with a large state, lukasa became very popular during the colonial era among Western collectors and museums featuring African art. They fulfilled all of our submerged assumptions about Africa—simple in design, yet colorful and toy-like, and unabashedly tribal in their primitive authenticity. They spoke to a strange otherness of spirit possession and chieftaincy from the heart of the dark

continent. Only slowly did Western-style historians of the Luba state, like Thomas Q. Reefe, begin to acknowledge lukasa as "memory aids" rather than just decorated objects.[3] Over the past few decades, recognition of their utility has become a feature of museum didactics and art volumes. Yet despite these advances, we have still tended until recently still to see lukasa as objects far apart from the kinds of historical tools—like articles and books—that we create. It seems that lukasa could be the subjects of historical analysis, but could not be accepted as histories themselves.

The main message of this book is related to the question of whether we should think and teach about the lukasa and Mbudye scholars as intrinsically different from the book and the academic historian, or if we can consider these two kinds of historical texts and knowledge workers in the same interpretive frame. I suppose I give *my* answer to this question simply by employing the concept of the lukasa as a map for this primer, although yours might be different. In the model I build here, each chapter serves the same function as a key feature on the lukasa, representing not so much a chronological point in time but rather a guide point to understanding the creation and curation of an African history course. Like the lukasa, this book is a navigation tool, if one suited to the structure of our field and our society rather than that of the Luba.

Structure of the Book

The first two chapters explore the possibilities of designing an African history course in a way that approximates the Mbudye ideal—as an intentional act with specific aims—rather than as a sequence of lessons with the singular objective of communicating factual knowledge. In chapter 1, I suggest that we think about our audiences—our students—both in terms of what they bring to our classroom "performances" as well as the lessons we want them to take away. I focus on what students lack (something that is the frequent subject of conversation among instructors) and also what they bring with them that might be useful or important. With a sense of the contours of that discussion in hand, I propose in chapter 2 that we carefully investigate what we want our students to take away from the class. We may not be trying to build community unity or solidify the legitimacy of a ruler, but we

do have objectives—moral, philosophical, intellectual, and material—and formally designing and recognizing these can help us in our course design.

The second part of the book correlates to the process of constructing a lukasa. The chapters in this part are arranged around surface questions of space, time, and identity in much the same way as the beads and symbols are carefully located on a lukasa. In chapter 3, I investigate questions of space. I look at the approaches of instructors who use diasporic, global, continental, and sub-Saharan African geographies of Africa and how their different decisions gave them and their students access to diverse narratives and themes that compose stories of the African past. Chapter 4 shifts to a focus on the dimension of time and the challenges and possibilities of periodizing and bridging the history of the longest-occupied continent in the story of humanity. In chapter 5 we move to the lexicon of identity in order to explore ways to help students to approach critical concepts like gender, ethnicity, nation, and race. The intention of this chapter is to give students tools for thinking about how we have historically "known" Africans in the United States as well as the ways Africans have known each other. Finally, chapter 6 looks at ways to bring together these parameters of time, space, and identity to frame a course in terms of both coverage and uncoverage.

The final part of the book maps to the lukasa performance. Over the course of this part, I propose opportunities that are specific to the African history classroom but that bear on broader questions for students on pathways to becoming historians, scholars, and citizens. Chapter 7 emphasizes the possibilities that are available by using the African history course to teach ethical scholarship and helping students to consider ethical frameworks as enduring lessons. Chapter 8 focuses on methodology and sources and investigates strategies for embedding skills and competencies into the course. These chapters include some discussion of the importance of "relevance" and "authenticity" to African history, but are more directed to the pedagogical opportunities offered by bringing diverse primary sources, theoretical works, and ethical considerations into our teaching. The issues addressed in each echo the question, introduced earlier, of whether to view the lukasa as artistic objects, sources for historians to analyze, or histories in and of themselves. Throughout this part of the book, we will look at the

many types of texts produced by Africans—oral tradition, architecture, archaeology, linguistics, and more—and suggest the value of asking similar questions about them and about African voices in the classroom setting.

The penultimate chapter zooms in on digital tools and resources as a way of delivering on these opportunities. This chapter emphasizes modern lukasa: With computers and the Internet, I seek to identify both scholarly tools useful in the classroom and elements of digital Africa, the high-tech, forward-looking face of a continent that is dynamic and on the move. I also, however, investigate many of the Internet manifestations and applications about Africa for their usefulness and limitations for learning. This lesson segues into the final chapter, which focuses on the performance itself: course delivery, class activity, and assessment techniques that, hopefully, will help you to pull together the pieces of your course into a well-designed whole.

Speaking of assessment, it is my hope that this primer will be useful to you in designing and curating your African history courses. In preparing this book, I studied every African history textbook and teaching resource that I could find. Many, but not all, are discussed in the chapters that follow. Because there was not enough space to share a broad survey of these teaching tools, I have chosen instead to directly address a particular textbook or resource only when I think it would be usefully employed to prepare or deliver a specific approach, course, or unit. You may well find texts that I have not described that work well for you.

In addition to studying textbooks, I spoke or corresponded with many experts in the field in an attempt to embody in this volume some of the collective wisdom of the profession in which we work. I also presented versions of this work in several venues, including annual meetings of the African Studies Association, and received useful feedback in the process. I do not claim to have conducted any kind of scientific survey, of course. Instead, I participated in a loose but broad-ranging conversation about pedagogy and curriculum.

I would be the first to admit that one book cannot possibly capture the challenges of teaching African history or encompassing all of its opportunities. African history as a discipline may only go back about a half-century,

but the presence of humans in Africa goes back several millions of years. Thus, bridging the history of Africa and African history is a task that requires a great deal of thought. It is also one that brings with it a weight of responsibility, both to generations of Africans long past and alive today and also to our students. I would be glad to know how this book may have succeeded or failed you in meeting those responsibilities. Email me to tell me.

Notes

Introduction

1 The main source for this discussion of the lukasa is Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts, eds., *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1996).
2 "Introduction," in Nooter Roberts and Roberts, *Memory*, 37.
3 Thomas Q. Reefe, "A Luba Memory Device," *African Arts* 10 (1977): 48–50.

One. A Place to Begin

1 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1962).
2 Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998); Martin Meredith, *The Fortunes of Africa: A 5000-Year History of Wealth, Greed, and Endeavor* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014).
3 I appreciate feedback from two high school teachers, whose names have been left off this citation at their request, and from fellow presenters and audiences at panels on teaching African history that were on the programs of the 2010 African Studies Association and 2011 American Historical Association annual conferences.
4 Joel Samoff, "Triumphalism, Tarzan, and Other Influences: Teaching about Africa in the 1990s," in Patricia Alden, David Lloyd, and Ahmed Samatar, eds., *African Studies and the Undergraduate Curriculum* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1994), 36, 35–84.
5 Binyavanga Wainaina, "How to Write about Africa," *Granta* 92 (2008), http://granta.com/How-to-Write-about-Africa/.
6 As an example of the videos they watch, see "Moving Windmills: The William Kamkwamba Story," posted February 14, 2008, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arD374MFk4w.