

***The African Orient:***  
**Edward Said's Orientalism and 'Western'**  
**Constructions of Africa**

**A. Czajka**

*York University, Canada*

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czajka@yorku.ca

Spanning 8,000 km from North to South, and stretching approximately the same distance from East to West, the continent of Africa is surpassed in area only by Asia.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the world's two largest geographical entities have been the objects of perhaps the most reductionist, delusional and artificial discursive constructions, which continually permeate and constrain the manner in which the 'West'<sup>2</sup> conceives of them. While Edward Said's *Orientalism* comprehensively analyses this phenomenon as it pertains to the Asian Orient, the *Orientalisation of Africa* remains under-theorized. It is not without caution—and some trepidation—that the concept of *Orientalism* is employed in this paper to refer both to Orientalism proper (as elaborated by Said in reference to the Near East) and the *Orientalisation of Africa*. Although the concept of Orientalism as theorized by Said clearly refers to a specific geographical area—Asia—it seems that many 'Western' representations of Africa follow an analogous methodological and conceptual framework. Thus, the extension of the concept of Orientalism beyond its intended scope seems strategically reasonable, if only to bring attention to the comparable conceptual manner in which the 'West' constructs, and engages with its Asian and Africa 'Others'.

The importance of theorizing 'Western' representations of Africa is immense. Not only does the existence of a compatible framework with regard to Africa allow for the construction of a comparison between the two distinct conceptualizations that exposes their differences, but it also makes possible a more grounded generalization as to the 'West's' discursive propensity with regard to its distant 'Others.'

The goal of this analysis is threefold. First, it aims to establish a general framework for the comparative examination of the phenomenon of 'Othering', extending it beyond the scope of Said's *Orientalism* in order to present it as a broad configuration that structures the interactions of the 'West' with the remainder of humanity. In this sense, Africa—as one of the 'West's' Others—will serve as a case study that reinforces and corroborates Said's assertions regarding the Asian Orient. While acknowledging this comparability between 'Western' conceptions of the two continents, the analysis, secondly, endeavours to illustrate the variations that exist within these discourses. Thus, while mindful of the analogous 'object' status imparted on the two continents, the similar tension between the proclivity to generalize and fragment or categorize, and the correspondence of the constructed and restrictive discursive frameworks, the analysis also considers the divergences between the two discourses, especially with respect to conceptualizations of cultural, psychological, and physical development and maturity. Through an examination of these tensions, the essay

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1.R.J. Harrison Church, *Africa and the Islands*. 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. (Toronto: John Wiley and Sons, 1977.) 15.

2.The 'West'—here Europe and North America—is not a homogenous and unitary actor, and the essay does not wish to present it as such. The scope of the analysis, however, does not permit an adequate assessment of the agent(s) who construct and perpetuate the Orientalist framework. The terms 'West,' and 'Western,' therefore, will serve as *de facto* concepts, which do not connote a unitary actor, nor imply a uniformity of interest and consciousness.

endeavours to expose the complex structure instituted by the 'West,' which establishes relationships of hierarchy among diverse entities, yet places 'Them' all firmly below itself. Finally, in an effort to account for the material foundations of these discursive hierarchies, an attempt is made to theorize their articulation with politico-economic concerns.

## A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

The limited scope of this examination precludes an exhaustive inspection of 'African Orientalism'<sup>1</sup> on the scale of Said's *Orientalism*. As a consequence, the subjective selection of material by an author, and the normative construction of fundamental concepts "in such a way as to *enable* what follows from them,"<sup>2</sup> is inevitably heightened here. The essay, therefore, does not pretend to provide a complete and unequivocal analysis of the historical evolution of African Orientalism. What it does propose is the necessity to critically deconstruct the prevalent images of Africa, as none are objective and apolitical, but are rather historically constituted within an exclusionary and politicized paradigm that captures only certain perceptions and interests.

The analysis will, therefore, proceed in the following manner. First, rather than attempting to consider and catalogue an enormous amount of literature (as Said does with spectacular results in *Orientalism*), the essay will examine a few selected books. Instances of African Orientalism, therefore, will be illustrated through specific—and perhaps slightly repetitive—textual references. The purpose of this is to demonstrate the existence of ample material that embodies an Orientalist attitude toward Africa, so as to validate the commencement of more detailed research into the phenomenon. Second, unlike the work of Said, this analysis will not attempt to distinguish between different types of Orientalisms—such as classical, modern, academic, etc.—nor will it endeavour to classify them according to their historical contexts and time-frames. The extensive research and time commitment demanded by such analyses necessitates that it be reserved for a later date. Examined instead will be a few works from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (selected because of their correspondence with the height of the colonial project in Africa—or the 'scramble for Africa'), as well as a selected number from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (chosen in order to illustrate the persistence of Orientalist frameworks). Rather than categorisation, primacy will be given to noting the recurring and enduring themes and motifs. Third, the essay will not attempt to identify the agent(s) who perpetuate the Orientalist framework with respect to Africa, beyond the highly problematic and superficial category of 'the West'. A debate over actors and agencies is squarely outside of the scope of this limited discussion, and would probably necessitate a work of its own. Finally, this essay examines only textual materials—more specifically, books. It is important to note, however, that an enormous body of film, documentary, art, televised investigative reports and news segments exists, whose subject matter engages various topics related to Africa. By altering the venues and channels of information dissemination, they open avenues of additional and novel forms of Orientalising that also merit inquiry.

## AFRICA AS OBJECT

*"A bare century ago Africa was thought of simply as the "Dark Continent," the country where savagery reigned supreme, where tropical diseases were uncontrolled, and where progress was nonexistent."*<sup>3</sup>

It is instructive to begin with an examination of the manner in which Africa's historical evolution is depicted. As Edward Said notes with reference to the Orientalist construction of Egyptian history, "British knowledge of Egypt is Egypt."<sup>4</sup> For the Egyptians, "Egypt is what England has occupied and now governs; foreign occupation therefore becomes 'the very basis' of contemporary Egyptian civilization."<sup>5</sup> Within an Orientalist paradigm therefore, *a* knowledge possessed by the powerful outsider becomes *the* foundational and often undisputed knowledge that necessitates accep-

1. The process by which the African continent and its peoples are represented by 'Western' discourses will be hereafter—for the sake of clarity—referred to as African Orientalism, despite the specific geographical connotations of the term Orientalism. Moreover, the term Orientalism will itself refer to both representations of Asia as well as Africa, and consequently, differentiations will only be possible based on the context of the discussion. This is representative of the conscious attempt to illustrate the commonalities of the methodology employed by some 'Western' commentators with respect to the perceptually inferior 'Other.'

2. Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (Toronto: (Vintage) Random House, 1978.) 16.

3. L.S.B. Leakey, *The Progress and Evolution of Man in Africa*. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1961.) 1.

4. Said, *Orientalism*, 32.

5. *Ibid.*, 34.

tance. While critical knowledge(s) and histories that challenge this Knowledge indeed exist, it is often difficult for them to compete with the power that buttresses the version perpetuated by the hegemon. Consequently, a version of history disseminated by those in positions of power becomes *the* History of a people, state, or as in the case of Africa, a continent. Orientalist portrayals of African evolution and history rely on precisely this mechanism. Not only is *the* History of Africa erroneously presented as a neutral and apolitical description of events, it also objectifies the continent, in the sense of making it an immobile and unresponsive recipient of external stimuli, lacking being and momentum of its own. Evidence of this can be found in numerous recent publications purporting to present *the* History of the continent.

The opening quote seems to encourage the 'West' to give itself a 'pat on the back' for maturing sufficiently enough to understand the subtleties of African evolution and development. Such change in perceptions, however, is only progressive in a perverse sense, for in some current literature, while the 'savagery' associated with Africa is better concealed, African History remains the history of the exploits of external actors on the passive and unresponsive African continent. While the essay does not wish to suggest that critical voices both from within and outside of the 'West' have been absent, it seems that Orientalist accounts of African history dominate. Within the texts analysed for this essay, for instance, sections dealing with African history restrict their scope to examinations of the invasions, conquests and other external interventions into the continent. R.J. Harrison Church's *Africa and the Islands*, for example, presents African History through a series of sections titled: "The Ancient Empires of North Africa," "The Arabs and Islam," "Trans-Saharan Trade," "The Portuguese Sea Route to Asia," "The European Slave Trade in Africa," "European Reaction to the Slave Trade," "The Exploration of Africa," "The Advent of European Control," "European Settlement in Africa," and "The Modern Age."<sup>1</sup> Even the preposition "in," used by the author in the title of the book's introductory chapter, "Africa *in* History"<sup>2</sup>—as opposed to "Africa's History" or even "The History of Africa"—connotes the passivity of the continent, which is not an agent of history, but instead, is immobile and fixed while history happens to it and around it. Anthony Sillery's *Africa: A Social Geography* depicts the history of the continent in a similar fashion. His sections include: "The Romans in North Africa," "The Arab Invasions," "The Reconquest of Spain," "Europeans in West Africa," "Arabs in East Africa," "The Portuguese on the East Coast," "The Dutch in South Africa," "The Slave Trade," "The Exploration of Africa," "The French in North Africa," "Arabs and British on the East Coast," "The Scramble for Africa," "Christian Missions," and "Colonial Africa."<sup>3</sup> Africa, therefore, is consigned to the status of an abiotic object on the surface of which the great battles of history take place.

As such, civilisation does not exist indigenously in Africa, but is imparted to it through the activities of outsiders. Consequently, Church's section entitled "The Ancient Empires of North Africa," and Sillery's "Ancient Africa," focus on the diffusion of Egyptian knowledge and civilisation into the heart of Africa. (Egypt itself has frequently been conceptualised as somehow separate from Africa, and perceived as more developed than the remainder of the continent, perhaps due to its association with the Asian Orient.) Similarly, the Arab penetration of Africa is conceived of as bringing with it civilising art, architecture, thought and culture;<sup>4</sup> the trans-Saharan trade brings goods from Europe;<sup>5</sup> even the slave trade benefits Africa, as over its course the Portuguese introduce the continent to many of its current staple crops including cassava, sweet potatoes, groundnuts, maize, lima beans and chillies.<sup>6</sup> The Arabs bring with them yams, cocoyams, bananas, peas, beans and sugar cane,<sup>7</sup> and one is made to wonder how African populations had not died of starvation prior to the 'saving grace' of slavery and invasion. Thus, already apparent is the subtle hierarchal positioning of the 'West's' Others, whereby the populations of the Asian Orient, while firmly below 'Western civilization,' are still perceived as more civilized than the native populations of Africa. Indebted to the Arab incursion and the slave trade, Africa—according to this literature—should also be grateful to the Christian missions, which "as pressure groups, or as individuals...have fought tyranny and oppression, roused opinion against scandals and abuses...stimulated valuable reforms...[and] provided the only social services that there were."<sup>8</sup> To Islamised and Arabic-influenced Africa, therefore, is added Christianized and Europeanized Africa.<sup>9</sup> As for an indigenous Africa, upon which these forces acted? On this subject, this literature remains largely silent.

Colonizers, too, must be acknowledged, as they "came to the coasts, built trading stations there...brought firearms to the people of the forest...[and] suddenly these people found themselves with economic and military advantages."<sup>10</sup>

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1. Church, *Africa and the Islands*.

2. Emphasis added.

3. Anthony Sillery, *Africa: A Social Geography*. 2nd Edition. (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1972.) Introduction.

4. Church, *Africa and the Islands*, 4.

5. *Ibid.*, 5.

6. *Ibid.*, 9.

7. *Ibid.*, 9.

8. Sillery, *Africa: A Social Geography*, 54.

9. Church, *Africa and the Islands*, 12.

As a result of colonization, “tribal wars have virtually ceased, livestock numbers have increased, larger areas are cultivated, more cash crops are grown, new means of transport and communication are available, and modern mines and industries have appeared.”<sup>1</sup> During the “Modern Age,” subsequently, Africa “has been opened up by railways, roads and air services.”<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding the question of empirical verifiability, or the debates over the actual desirability of the transformations, the clear implication is that external forces constructed Africa from a previously nonexistent entity—a “blank space”<sup>3</sup>—on the globe. The reoccurring use of the passive construction—i.e., Africa “has been opened up;” “Africa was influenced,” as opposed to “Africa opened up”—reinforces the acquiescence of the continent as it is being acted upon. In a manner similar to that observed by Said, Orientalist African literature consigns Africa to the status of object, existing in history either as a savage “Dark Continent,” or as a construct perpetually created and re-created by external ‘civilizing’ forces.

## AFRICA AS SUBJECT

*It was not...the fault of the peoples of Africa, so much as the results of the accidents of geographical position and climatic changes which isolated Africa from what we call ‘civilization’ at the very time when Africa most needed the stimulus.*<sup>4</sup>

Subjectivity, or the ability to define, determine and fulfil one’s own interests, has at times been afforded to Africa. Within African Orientalist literature, this has taken two forms. First, the subjectivity of Africa is presented as an ephemeral and isolated phenomenon, and/or as producing undesirable consequences. Second, attempts at endowing Africa with a more substantive and progressive subjectivity frequently disintegrate into an objectification of the continent in the manner analysed in the previous section.

With respect to Africa’s subjectivity, the literature analysed for this essay implies that African attempts to become a subject of history and not its object succeed only in hurting it in the process. In a view expressed by both Church’s *Africa and the Islands* and Alan Best and Harm J. de Blij’s *African Survey*, for instance—it is crucial to keep in mind that these works were written as recently as 1977—the African peoples’ attempts at determining something as simple as diet and meal composition has had disastrous consequences. As Church illustrates, while

great efforts have been made to combat disease, especially in those countries colonized by Europeans...the real disorder [in Africa] is malnutrition which, in turn, depends on the social and economic advancement of the African peoples. Backwardness and superstition are closely related to the frequently appalling conditions of hygiene, the inadequate and unbalanced diets, and the high pre-natal and infant mortality.<sup>5</sup>

Best and de Blij concur, and throw the weight of scientific and empirical research behind their statements. They cite a study by Frederick Simoons, which apparently determined that “among some tribes either the flesh of chickens or chicken eggs, and sometimes both, are not eaten, eggs being considered the excrement of fowls, and the flesh being offensive.”<sup>6</sup> Although both authors allude to the role of economics, the complicity of the ‘West’ in the economic calamities of Africa is rarely made with much force or conviction. The implication is clear: Africa has failed as subject in even such a simple issue area. Consequently, it must be relegated to the status of object for its own good.

The only other manner in which African subjectivity is conceived of, is as an ephemeral and temporary anomaly. The examined literature, while acknowledging that Africa was indeed “the birth-place of man himself,” and thereafter “in the forefront of all world progress”<sup>7</sup>—in perfecting the hand-axe and the spear-head, for instance<sup>8</sup>—also argues that this did not extend beyond the beginning of the Pleistocene Era. From this point onward, Africa “became a relative backwater, which the waves of new ideas seldom, if ever, reached.”<sup>9</sup>

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10. Alan Best and Harm J. de Blij, *African Survey*. (Toronto: John Wiley and Sons, 1977.) 71.

1. *Ibid.*, Chapter 4-6.

2. Church, *Africa and the Islands*, 13.

3. Joseph Conrad, “Heart of Darkness,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume 2, 6th Edition. Ed. M.H. Abrams, et al. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1993.) 1759.

4. Leakey, *The Progress and Evolution of Man in Africa*, 12.

5. Church, *Africa and the Islands*, 72.

6. Best and de Blij, *African Survey*, 50.

7. Leakey, *The Progress and Evolution of Man in Africa*, 1.

8. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

Due to the historical prevalence of the representation of Africa as object and the linguistic and conceptual constraints maintained by Orientalist discourse, attempts at more nuanced re-conceptualizations often fail. One such effort was made by L.S.B. Leakey, who challenged the prevailing notion that the “the racial make-up of the population of Africa” was intrinsically at fault for its lack of ‘civilization.’<sup>1</sup> Despite his effort, he ultimately does not escape the objectifying framework arguing, as this section’s opening quote indicates, that while Africans’ lack of civilization is not their own fault, they are nonetheless relatively uncivilized. Leakey’s second attempt at more nuanced analysis can also be similarly deconstructed. Leakey notes that,

during the last hundred years the greater part of Africa has at long last got beyond the awakening stages after its long slumber and is really stirring into action again. This awakening has been brought about by many different agencies: explorers, administrators, traders, missionaries, settlers, and even mere adventurers.<sup>2</sup>

Africa, therefore, is still not a subject in its revival, as the renaissance is actually created by external agencies such as explorers, missionaries and settlers. Africa is not itself reawakening—it is *being* reawakened. It is beyond the scope of this essay to speculate whether Leakey was constrained by the norms of his academic community, by linguistic traditions, normative conceptual definitions, or all of the factors combined. It suffices to note that as in the case of Asian Orientalism, the framework of African Orientalism serves as a “formidable censor in the very vocabulary [that one is] forced to employ,”<sup>3</sup> and as a discourse that relegates its subject matter to the status of an inactive and immobile object. The African Orientalist framework, therefore, historically consigns Africa to the status of object, even if temporary and largely self-destructive moments of subjectivity are identified. Like Said’s Egypt, Africa *is* what external agents construct.

## AFRICA IN GENERAL/AFRICA IN FRAGMENTS

*[Orientalism comprises] the culturally sanctioned habit of deploying large generalizations by which reality is divided into various collectives: languages, races, types, colors, mentalities, each category being not so much a neutral designation as an evaluative interpretation.*<sup>4</sup>

Apart from similarly consigning their respective subjects of study to the status of objects, African and Asian Orientalisms also share a proclivity to formulate blanket generalizations about their subject matter. In the case of the Orientalisation of the Arab world, for instance, under the label of ‘Islam’ are subsumed “more than 800,000,000 people...millions of square miles of territory...[and] dozens of societies, states, histories, geographies, cultures.”<sup>5</sup> As Said further notes, one of Orientalism’s main features is to “make out of every observable detail a generalization and out of every generalization an immutable law about the Oriental nature, temperament, mentality, custom, or type.”<sup>6</sup> It is evident that African Orientalism involves an analogous process. “Despite local differences, there is a striking uniformity of culture among these primitive people,”<sup>7</sup> asserts Church. In addition to the homogeneity of culture, “a certain uniformity unmistakably characterises [Africa’s] inhabitants” as well.<sup>8</sup> These conceptualizations of African culture and African peoples permit and validate statements such as:

[A] racial trait...[compels] the African—[whose essence has been determined by the Orientalist]—to translate all his activities into rhythmic movement<sup>9</sup> [and ensures that] his whole being, his whole life, is permeated by music<sup>10</sup>; [The African’s] predominant passion is a love of finery and of women, but the tribes of purer blood are distinguished by their warlike spirit<sup>11</sup>; The Abyssinians are by nature uncommonly quarrelsome,

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9.*Ibid.*, 11.

1.*Ibid.*, 11.

2.*Ibid.*, 17.

3.Said, *Orientalism*, 155.

4.*Ibid.*, 227.

5.Edward Said, *Covering Islam*. (Toronto: (Vintage) Random House, 1997.) Introduction, li.

6.Said, *Orientalism*, 86.

7.Church, *African and the Islands*, 79.

8. Keith Johnston, *Africa: Stanford’s Compendium of Geography and Travel*. (London: Edward Standord, 1880.) 12.

9.Sillery, *Africa: A Social Geography*, 20.

10.*Ibid.*, 19.

and when drunk, offensive to each other and difficult to handle<sup>1</sup> [unlike the ‘civilized’ races who are extremely pleasant when intoxicated?]; Abyssinians have the instinct of destruction<sup>2</sup>; Yambo are quarrelsome, and consequently cannot help being at enmity with neighbouring tribes. Although aggressive to persons weaker than themselves, these overgrown people are in reality cowardly and weak<sup>3</sup>; Lying comes altogether so natural to the Arabs and Berbers, that it would be difficult to find a single individual addicted to the practice of truthfulness.<sup>4</sup>

This tendency toward sweeping generalizations extends beyond the *content* of Orientalist work—with its analyses of the African ‘nature’ and ‘essence’—and into the *style* and *structure* of the literature. A casual perusal of works under the subject heading ‘Africa’ reveals a number of books that discuss the people, physical geography, climate, history, culture, religion, economics and politics of some essence that is ‘Africa,’ most in fewer than five hundred pages.<sup>5</sup> Even more telling are chapter titles such as “Africa as a Whole,”<sup>6</sup> and “How the African Lives.”<sup>7</sup>

In direct tension with Orientalism’s penchant for blanket generalizations exists its proclivity to classify, categorize and catalogue. Said notes that, “Orientalism is absolutely speaking anatomical and enumerative: to use its vocabulary is to engage in the particularizing and dividing of things Oriental into manageable parts.”<sup>8</sup> Orientalists engage in codifying, tabulating, comparing, dividing, sub-dividing, and re-dividing their subject matter, “without ever changing [their] mind about the Orient as being always the same, unchanging, uniform, and radically peculiar object.”<sup>9</sup> In the case of African Orientalism, this appetite for fragmentation begins with the obsessively detailed tables of contents that precede much of the early—19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century—literature on Africa. These painstakingly divide the author’s observations into numerous chapters, which are then sub-divided into sub-chapters ranging from “The Seasons, Equinoxes, and Solstices,” through to “Soil,” “Physical Appearance of the Arabs and Berbers,” “Morality, Vice and Crime,” and “Political Changes.”<sup>10</sup> Africa’s geography is also meticulously detailed, with the latitude and longitude scrupulously recorded at every movement, and descriptions such as “the stream is 1,000 paces broad and flows with a velocity of 12 miles an hour between rocky banks from twenty to thirty feet above the level of the stream,”<sup>11</sup> saturating the literature. The inhabitants of the continent are likewise zealously classified and catalogued, according to physical characteristics, race and language. The arbitrariness and contrived nature of these classifications is clear, as nearly every author utilises a distinct schema and consequently produces different categories.<sup>12</sup>

Frequent also is the use of extensive appendices. In *Africa: Stanford’s Compendium of Geography and Travel* for instance, Keith Johnston compiles a twenty-four page “Synoptic Table” that comprises “all known African tribes and languages,” cataloguing them according to their geographical location—by latitude and longitude—and including miscellaneous information such as “a crafty and cowardly fishing race,” and “ferocious cannibals, the terror of surrounding tribes.”<sup>13</sup> There remain, of course, a large number of “unclassified” tribes and languages which, as they do not seem to the external observer to be ethnologically or linguistically related to the enumerated races—and recalling that Africa is an object constructed by an external subject/observer—effectively cease to exist.

The similar tension within Asian and African Orientalism between broad generalizations and fervent particularization underlies the subordination of the Orient to the Occident. First, it reinforces the subject position of the Occident, vis-à-vis the object status of the Orient, through the power of the former to name, classify and construct the latter. Second, subsuming the particularized and differentiated fragments under an inflexible and disempowering general framework serves to trivialise the diversities, restraining, repressing and compressing them downward and backward to the

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11. Johnston, *Africa: Stanford’s Compendium of Geography and Travel*, 97.

1. Henry Landor Savage, *Across Widest Africa*. (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1907.) 171.

2. *Ibid.*, 186.

3. Johnston, *Africa: Stanford’s Compendium of Geography and Travel*, 226.

4. *Ibid.*, 45.

5. See Church, *African and the Islands*, and Sillery, *Africa: A Social Geography*.

6. Church, *African and the Islands*.

7. Sillery, *Africa: A Social Geography*.

8. Said, *Orientalism*, 72.

9. *Ibid.*, 77 and 98.

10. Johnston, *Africa: Stanford’s Compendium of Geography and Travel*. See also Savage, *Across Widest Africa*; Sillery, *Africa: A Social Geography*; Best and de Blij, *African Survey*; and Marq De Villers and Sheila Hirtle, *Into Africa: A Journey Through the Ancient Empires*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997.)

11. Johnston, *Africa: Stanford’s Compendium of Geography and Travel*, 168.

12. See Sillery, *Africa: A Social Geography*, 8 and 20; Church, *African and the Islands*, 60; and Johnston, *Africa: Stanford’s Compendium of Geography and Travel*, 525-556.

13. Johnston, *Africa: Stanford’s Compendium of Geography and Travel*, 556, 549.

radical terminal of the generality.<sup>1</sup>

## AFRICA FRAMED

*Human societies, at least the more advanced cultures, have rarely offered the individual anything but imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism for dealing with “other” cultures.*<sup>2</sup>

Like Asian Orientalism, African Orientalism is also present in both a latent and manifest form. The former, as characterized by Said, is “an almost unconscious (and certainly untouchable) positivity,” while the latter represents “the various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology.”<sup>3</sup> In the latent form, African Orientalism is a historically maintained, immobile consensus that serves as the primary lens through which to observe the continent. It ensures that Africa is forever the object, not subject of history, and structures knowledge about Africa into the format of the previously discussed *differentiated homogeneity*. While this underlying framework remains immutable, specific facts, observations and hypotheses of African Orientalism—manifest Orientalism—do change, allowing for some movement of ideas and language, at times pressing against the fixed boundaries of latent Orientalism, but never actually rupturing the construction. Thus, while language and ideas may change with the sensibilities of the Orientalists and their public, and overt racism and dehumanization may take on more subtle forms, the framework that structures Africa and Africans into subordinate and object positions remains as an almost subconscious means of maintaining a global hierarchy of knowledge and power.

African Orientalism, therefore, is analogous in three ways to the Asian Orientalism that Said examines. First, it renders Africa (the Other) a motionless object of history, wholly incapable of self-consciousness, and consequently non-existent except as an external, Orientalist construction. Second, it structures and sustains the tension between blanket generalization and dissected particularity (*differentiated homogeneity*), which underlies observation and knowledge of Africa. Finally, and most fundamentally, African Orientalism supplies a rigid membrane that encases ‘Western’ awareness of the people and their continent.

## AFRICAN CULTURE

*I involuntarily ask myself, Am I awake or dreaming? Whether the cities of Fez and Paris can possibly be situated on the same planet!*<sup>4</sup>

“Central Africa is certainly not a place where one looks for art,”<sup>5</sup> asserts Henry Landor Savage, a 19<sup>th</sup> century explorer. According to the observations of some of his contemporaries, neither is the rest of the continent. Other than in the most rudimentary forms, culture of any sort evades Africa, leaving it to its natural state of uncivilized barbarity. This again excludes Egypt, which as previously noted, was frequently perceived to be located not within Africa but within the Asian Orient. While Asian Orientalism depicts an exotic and supple society and culture—albeit still inferior to Europe, and presently in a degenerated form—the examined literature on Africa portrays its subject matter as wholly without culture. Consequently, the Asian Orientalist is obsessed with restoring the region from present barbarism to former classical greatness,<sup>6</sup> and becomes a revivalist, who seeing the decrepitude and impotence of the modern era finds it his duty to resuscitate the lost classical Orient.<sup>7</sup> The African Orientalist, on the other hand, can only cry out in shock and horror, as the opening quote indicates, at the baseness of the continent. Nothing can be rescued, nothing revived, for there was never anything there, never anything to degenerate from. Johnston, for instance, detects—as if it is his scientific duty to do so—“no trace of any tradition.”<sup>8</sup> And if he, the European, the Westerner, the knower, cannot detect it, it does not exist. The only ‘culture’ that is detected is a barbaric and savage cult of death, which sends

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1. Said, *Orientalism*, 234.

2. *Ibid.*, 204.

3. *Ibid.*, 206.

4. Johnston, *Africa: Stanford's Compendium of Geography and Travel*, 35.

5. Savage, *Across Widest Africa*, 210.

6. Said, *Orientalism*, 85.

7. *Ibid.*, 79.

8. Johnston, *Africa: Stanford's Compendium of Geography and Travel*, 483.

“swarms” of Africans into the streets to watch four soldiers “carrying off an unlucky wretch, hacked and covered with blood,”<sup>1</sup> while in another alleyway men unscrupulously surround “an open bier on which is exposed a corpse withered into a mummy.”<sup>2</sup> African children receive no particular education, tobacco and hashish are *universally* used, and so it is no wonder that the people are altogether distinguishable by a lack of “noble sentiments,” and a degree of coarseness descending in some cases to the level of “downright brutality.”<sup>3</sup>

African religions are similarly unsophisticated, with superstitions rampant even among the higher classes.<sup>4</sup> Yet most telling perhaps, is the non-existence of inter-personal relations, revealed by the fact that “knives and forks are still unknown luxuries,”<sup>5</sup> and that “one could not persuade [Africans] to be grasped by the hand [in a European-style handshake].”<sup>6</sup> Both the Asian and African Orientalists work under the assumption that if something is not detectable by the Orientalist knower it does not exist. The Asian Orientalist, nevertheless, at least recognizes a distinct Oriental culture—however degenerate and inferior to that of the Occident. The knower of Africa, on the other hand, denies the label of ‘culture’ to anything African.

## AFRICAN MIND

*Might the psyche of Africans turn out to be quite distinct and not really supported by the findings of European psychologists who have studied Europe?*<sup>7</sup>

A perceptible difference also exists between the Asian and African Orientalist’s conception of human beings. Although Asian Orientals are often barbaric and savage, they nonetheless possess an exoticism, eccentricity, sensuality and fascinating queerness. The Africans, conversely, possess no redeeming qualities, and are characterized exclusively by their baseness, infantile behaviour and psychological immaturity.

Overt or subtle, the motif of conceptualizing African individuals as infantile permeates the examined literature. First, contemptuous and disparaging remarks are frequently made regarding hygiene. “It is quite enough to look at any well-to-do Abyssinian, male or female, to perceive that even the face and hands are quite innocent of soap. Of the body we will not speak—the seldom-changed clothes discharge a fetid odour which leaves no doubt whatever on the subject,”<sup>8</sup> observes Savage. As if to underscore the childishness of ‘these people,’ he also records an incident during which his sketchbook was passed around to a number of Abyssinian officials, and “was duly returned to [him] after many exclamations of admiration and covered with finger marks.”<sup>9</sup> The tone of such remarks conjures for the reader an image of a disapproving parent scolding a cowering child.

Second, images of uneducated, naïve and obtuse individuals, who can be easily tricked and manipulated abound. Savage creates such imagery, for instance, in a tale of his attempt to photograph a group of African women:

I had endeavoured to photograph them; but they had shown great fright and refused to be taken. When we got to the stream, I crossed first upon my horse, and having got my camera ready, waited for the women to wade across the water, carrying their loads upon their backs, when they would be quite helpless. It was taking a mean advantage, I confess. When they got quite near, were the current was stronger, I produced my camera and took the photograph.<sup>10</sup>

Again, the reader cannot but visualise a child tricked, for instance, into taking her medicine, with the assumption that once consumed, she will realise that there was really ‘nothing to it.’

The final image presented to the reader is one that depicts Africans as capricious and whining children in need of the Orientalist’s discipline. Again, most clearly demonstrative is one of Savage’s anecdotes, relating this time to an

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1. *Ibid.*, 45.

2. *Ibid.*, 35.

3. *Ibid.*, 45.

4. Savage, *Across Widest Africa*, 102.

5. Johnston, *Africa: Stanford’s Compendium of Geography and Travel*, 44.

6. Savage, *Across Widest Africa*, 42-3.

7. W.E. Abraham, *The Mind of Africa*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962.) 59.

8. Savage, *Across Widest Africa*, 101. For similar remarks see 86.

9. *Ibid.*, 90.

10. *Ibid.*, 153.

encounter at a checkpoint:

The soldiers ran after us. I treated them with absolute contempt and made them sweat going up the steep hill after my mules...As they were getting excited and insolent, I gave orders to my men to tell them to keep behind. The fellows got extremely anxious, and discovering they were dealing the wrong way with us became more submissive. They entreated me to show a pass, if I had one, or else we must go back...I would hear of nothing, and made them struggle up to the top of the pass (6,400 feet).<sup>1</sup>

Once more, a salient image emerges of a parent letting a screaming child pound its fists, in a vain attempt to grab the attention of the sensible and practical adult. Much less subtle imagery—"they behaved like silly children and took refuge behind me"<sup>2</sup>—is also abundant. Similarly, Savage describes the behaviour of the Yambo tribe as follows:

Although giants in stature, [they] possess as much brain, or possibly less, than an average three-year old child of any European country. They are capricious to a degree...with an extraordinarily developed habit of nagging; sulky at intervals, and suspicious at all times...they are quite unpleasant if they are not at once satisfied in their fancies.<sup>3</sup>

This propensity of African Orientalism to infantilise its subject in this manner seems to differentiate it from Asian Orientalism. While the discursive Orientalist structure is common, the divergent conceptions of the level of maturity and development create a hierarchy according to which there exist gradations of inferiority. Thus, while both Africans and Asians are psychologically and developmentally subordinate to Europeans, the former occupy the lowest rung of the ladder. A more nuanced hierarchy further exposes that the 'darker' the Africans' skin, and the further South their residence, the lower their place on the pyramid of civilization.<sup>4</sup>

## AFRICAN BODY

*I naturally accept and even stress the fact that there are major differences...which separate the different races of mankind...I would be inclined to suggest that however great may be the physical differences between such races as the European and the Negro, the mental differences are greater still.*<sup>5</sup>

Although some, as the above quote indicates, find the psychological difference among the residents of the Occident and Africa the most daunting, an obsessive infatuation with African bodies permeates the examined literature. Perhaps the most prominent feature of African Orientalism is the propensity to prioritise the body as a tool of description, differentiation and categorization. Throughout the literature, chapters and sections dedicated to analysis of a particular 'race' or 'tribe' open with, and/or deal exclusively with, the body.<sup>6</sup> "Heads vary greatly in breadth, while faces are usually oval, medium in size and rather flattish. Noses are narrow, and either straight or slightly convex in profile. Beards are often dense, eyebrows often meet above the nose, and lips are usually fairly thick,"<sup>7</sup> observes Lloyd Biggs—in 1960—with immaculate 'precision' in a description of the Mzabites. Using the body as a primary categorizing feature, Savage likewise notes that,

the nose assumes greater proportions [among the Galla] than further east; in fact, it is quite big and flattened, with broad nostrils, which make Galla faces better looking in the full face than when seen side face. The glabella, or supra-orbital, bone in the central portion of the brow, is quite prominent and extra-developed.<sup>8</sup>

A list of similarly detailed and meticulous observations could extend indefinitely.<sup>9</sup> It is more crucial to expose,

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1. *Ibid.*, 155-6.

2. *Ibid.*, 41.

3. *Ibid.*, 221.

4. For evidence of this see the account of Savage's journey, and his depictions of the people he encounters in *Across Widest Africa*.

5. Leakey, *The Progress and Evolution of Man in Africa*, 15.

6. Savage, *Across Widest Africa*, 216. Also see, Johnston, *Africa: Stanford's Compendium of Geography and Travel*, 95.

7. Lloyd Biggs, *Tribes of the Sahara*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960.) 84.

8. Savage, *Across Widest Africa*, 188.

however, the implications of this corporal obsession. First, it is important to note that all of the classifications take the Caucasian male physique as the 'norm' for comparison, indicating that all other human beings are in one way or another a deviation from this corporeal essence. Second, these corporeal codifications are a reflection of the broad desire of the Orientalist to scientifically observe, dissect, enumerate and classify his object of interest, taming and subduing it in the process, leaving nothing untouched and unexamined. Third, the primacy allotted to the body not only exposes a fascination with that constructed as 'different,' but also reveals the Orientalist's assumption that Africans do not exist beyond their corporeal state of nature. Thus, while the Caucasians residing in Africa, and even the Arabs and other Asian Orientals, are frequently catalogued according to their occupations, fashions and cultural attributes,<sup>1</sup> native Africans are classified according to their physicality.

This subtle dehumanization is frequently complimented by more explicit references to the animalistic essence of Africans. Orientalist literature not only compares African men and women to animals, but by obscuring the line between animal and human being, also precipitates a sort of virtual, textual metamorphosis of African into animal and animal into African. The straightforward comparisons are abundant: "The skin of the Niam-Niam was of a deep chocolate colour, and the hair of the usual negrito [sic] type presenting a woolly, poodle-like appearance;"<sup>2</sup> "Men and women had their eyes wide apart, almost bird-like."<sup>3</sup> However, frequent are also the virtual metamorphoses:

There was a good deal of the monkey in the movements and postures of these peoples. One day I saw some six women in a row, squatting just like quadrumanes upon a long pole...They had chimpanzee-like big paunches and delightful expressions on their faces;<sup>4</sup> Large crowds of naked natives assembled around my camp, and squatted down on their heels, remaining there the whole evening...Their faces were flattened, with the central part of the nose much developed, and the supra-orbital central bumps abnormally so;<sup>5</sup> I never saw any of them laugh heartily; They seemed to take life sadly, not unlike the long-legged water-birds along the stream, whom they closely resembled. Nature has a wonderful way of adapting people and animal to local conditions.<sup>6</sup>

In perhaps the most controversial passage of his novel *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad similarly dehumanizes the bodies of Africans by stripping them of all human substance and preserving only their relationship to the natural and animal world:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all attitudes of pain, abandonment and despair...near the same tree two more bundles of acute angles sat with their legs drawn up...all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse...as I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink. He lapped out of his hand, then sat up in the sunlight, crossing his shins in front of him, and after a time let his woolly head fall on his breastbone.<sup>7</sup>

Although one could argue that the text as a whole critically examines the treatment of Africans at the hands of European colonizers, Conrad seems to be ultimately constrained by the Orientalist imagery and vocabulary that comprise the discourse of his time. Perhaps in a conscious attempt to heighten the force of his argument, and to enliven the sense of horror and repulsion at the acts of colonial violence, Conrad selects from the collection of available images the ones that are most salient. While the reasons for Conrad's choice of metaphors remain in the realm of speculation, what is important is that the warehouse of African effigies available to Conrad contains mostly degrading and animalistic images of the body. It is in this repetitive and zealous dehumanization and obsession with the body that African Orientalism seems to depart from its Asian counterpart.

This divergence of the two Orientalisms is especially apparent in the descriptions of the female body. While the

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9. For other examples see Johnston, *Africa: Stanford's Compendium of Geography and Travel*, 324 and 237; Savage, *Across Widest Africa*, 166.

1. For examples see Church, *African and the Islands*, 65, and Sillery, *Africa: A Social Geography*, 13.

2. Savage, *Across Widest Africa*, 388-9.

3. *Ibid.*, 348.

4. *Ibid.*, 347.

5. *Ibid.*, 209.

6. *Ibid.*, 243.

7. Conrad, "Heart of Darkness," 1770-1.

Asian Oriental woman is a sexual, sensual, seductive and exotic embodiment of the Occidental man's fantasy, the African woman is debauched, animalistic and undesirable in her disgraceful nakedness. African women are "of no beauty from an anatomical point of view. They [have] extraordinarily pendent breasts, the arms and legs [are] ill-proportioned, the joints malformed or deformed, particularly at the elbows and knees. The body [is] misshapen."<sup>1</sup> Thus, although she is dissected and reconstructed by the Orientalist<sup>2</sup>—an unquestionable authority on the female body—the African woman is ultimately declared repulsive. The Asian woman, on the other hand, although decisively not portrayed in a liberating light, has at least evolved beyond the baseness of her African counterpart.

Whereas Asian Orientalism certainly dehumanizes and objectifies both the female and male body, the Asian Orientalist seems to more frequently focus on the religion and culture of the Oriental. Moreover, a palpable fear of what is unknown and different (and in the case of Islam, perceived as powerful and threatening) is also present. The African Orientalist, conversely, does not fearfully revere the culture of his subject, for his subject is cultureless; he does not fear the power of the African, for the African is a naïve child. The cause of his fear and contempt is the African's savagery, barbarity and animalism.

Thus, while both Asian and African discourses are constrained by analogous structures of representation, African Orientalism's representation of the cultural, psychological and physical characteristics of African individuals concretely differentiates it from Asian Orientalism.

## HIERARCHY OF ORIENTS

*Although the teachings of Islamism occupy the lowest place amongst the civilised religions of the present day, they nevertheless produce a relatively civilising effect when contrasted with the cruel fetishism of the natives.*<sup>3</sup>

The complex Oriental structure, while maintaining the Occident as the solitary pinnacle of progress and enlightenment, constructs a hierarchical relationship between Asia and Africa. While Asian Orientalists were assembling an inferior and subservient Asian Orient, their Africanist counterparts were simultaneously constructing their subject matter into a subordinate position to both the Occident and the Asian Orient. Exemplary is the following statement by Savage:

As compared with the dances of Asia, I never saw among any of the tribes of Central Africa dances of any originality or grace. The Yambo, like all negroes, dance a great deal at their festivals...the men opposite the women, who sing and clap their hands, while the men jump and hop about lightly knees slightly bent...these people do nothing but play on the tam-tam all day and all night.<sup>4</sup>

The underdevelopment and animalism of the Africans permeates even their dance, and consigns them to a position of inferiority relative to Asian Orientals.

Correspondingly, even within African Orientalism, a subtle hierarchy is erected between Africans of Arabic origin and native African groups. Portrayals of Moroccans and Moroccan cities, for instance, residually echo descriptions of the Asian Orient. The atmosphere of the city of Fez, therefore, resembles images of Arab cities, with the queer, chaotic confusion of crowded streets, "swarms of children pass[ing] by with scald-heads and all manner of cuts and scars; repulsive old hags bareheaded and with exposed breasts; idiots nearly stark naked crowned with garlands, with branches in their hands and incessantly laughing, singing, and dancing about."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Arab cities such as Mequinez (Meknes) are still thought of as fallen from their classical greatness,<sup>6</sup> a conceptualization common to Asian Orientalism, yet generally missing in depictions of Africa, as the latter has never evolved, and consequently, cannot de-evolve. Yet even these regions, and the individuals inhabiting them are tainted by their African surroundings. Johnston notes that,

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1. Savage, *Across Widest Africa*, 166.

2. For more detailed dissections of the female body see Savage, *Across Widest Africa*, 50-1, 345-6.

3. Johnston, *Africa: Stanford's Compendium of Geography and Travel*, 14.

4. Savage, *Across Widest Africa*, 224.

5. Johnston, *Africa: Stanford's Compendium of Geography and Travel*, 45.

6. *Ibid.*, 36.

with the exception of some spitting and hissing noises from the mob, and their generally sullen looks and muttered curses, there was little to mark [his] first impression of Marocco [sic] except its likeness to the Oriental cities [he] had already visited. Most things, however, wore a more African tinge. The black race was more numerous here, and there were many indications that the western Arab is several degrees lower in the scale of civilisation than his eastern co-religionist.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, while the Arab of Africa is inferior to the Arab of Asia, the native of Africa is still less civilized. Consequently, the Oriental hierarchy increases in complexity and sophistication.

The problematic geopolitical position of Egypt further complicates this hierarchy. Both Asian and African Orientalists seem to place it in a position of superiority. While it remains intrinsically Other, Johnston, for instance, notes that “Egypt will soon belong only geographically to Africa; in everything it is becoming European.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Orientalism uncovered by Edward Said is not an anomalous and homogenous phenomenon. Numerous Orients exist within the Orientalist structure, arranged in a meticulous and calculated hierarchy, yet always subservient to the Occident.<sup>3</sup>

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ORIENTALISMS

*The overriding reason for the continued existence of most European settlements of all types along the western African coast eventually became their usefulness in successfully supplying sufficient numbers of unfortunate victims for the trans-Atlantic slave trade.*<sup>4</sup>

The final portion of this paper endeavours to theorize the juncture between the discursive formations of African and Asian Orientalism and material, politico-economic considerations. While this section does not provide an exhaustive and irrevocable theory, it suggests both the necessity of uniting the discursive and politico-economic spheres, as well as possible points of departure for such analyses of the phenomenon of Orientalism.

According to the argument presented in this paper, the Asian and African versions of Orientalism are similar not only in creating a fixed hierarchy within which the dynamic Occident is perpetually superior to the static Orient, but also in their obsession with the dissection, classification and categorization of the Oriental. Two phenomena are potentially interrelated with these discursive constructions: imperialism in general and settler colonialism in particular. ‘Western’ imperialism and colonialism in Asia and Africa can be conceptualised along the lines of economic or geopolitical arguments—or as a combination of both of these interrelated factors. In addition to the search for consumer markets, capital also ceaselessly seeks out novel supplies of raw materials in order to overcome the eventual shortage that inherently arises from the exploitation of its immediate surroundings. Imperialism and colonialism, therefore, although not always coupled, are interrelated outcomes of the expansive logic of capitalism.

Imperialism and colonialism, however, are also plausibly accounted for by strategic and geopolitical considerations. Geopolitical and economic factors are, of course, often related. The colonisation in North Africa, for instance—from the time of the first Roman invasion—can be conceptualised as a geopolitical and politico-economic strategy, as both the advantageous border along the Mediterranean Sea, and the arable and prosperous agricultural land spurred frequent invasion and colonization.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the colonization of West Africa was not only guided by the attempt to discover an alternate route to the “spice-producing Islands of the East,” but also provided the European colonizers with access to various raw materials and minerals, and later, with a secure supply of slaves.<sup>6</sup>

While the association between imperialism, colonialism and capitalism is not difficult to conceptualise, the question of the relation between these phenomena and the discursive realm of Orientalism remains. While explanations of these interrelations are undoubtedly more complex than the following implies, the subsequent analysis nevertheless provides some points of departure for further examination. First, it seems as though the discursive hierarchical positioning of the Occident with respect to Asia and Africa reinforces the legitimacy of Occidental imperial and colonial penetration of these Orients. As both are uncivilised, degenerate and static entities, inhabited by peoples who do not

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1. *Ibid.*

2. *Ibid.*, 204.

3. Although the Occident is itself not a homogenous entity, and different gradations of Occidental-ness may be observed, such analysis is beyond the very limited scope of this essay.

4. Norman Bennett, *Africa and Europe: From Roman Times to the Present*. (New York: Africana Publishing, 1975.) 47.

5. Bennett, *Africa and Europe: From Roman Times to the Present*, 20.

6. *Ibid.*, 29 and 43.

possess the ability to adequately control their own destinies, the Occident is not only justified in its penetration, but this penetration also becomes a method of ‘saving’ and ‘redeeming’ the Orientals from their inevitable self-destruction. Moreover, as the degenerate nature of the Oriental populations precludes them from making effective use of their resources, economic plunder and exploitation at the hands of the Occident seems justified. The Occident, therefore, maintains imperial and colonial grasp of its Orients precisely by maintaining itself in the position of hegemon through the use of coercion and force buttressed by the justification and legitimization provided by Orientalist discourse.

The second commonality between Asian and African Orientalism, namely, the obsession with categorisation and classification, can be conceptualised as a method for the efficient management of geopolitical and politico-economic resources (Africa and Asia) by the hegemonic Occident. In the case of Asian and African Orientalism, the relationship between knowledge and power may help to account for the Orientalists’ obsessive dissection and codification of everything Oriental. Thus, the two striking similarities of Asian and African Orientalism—their propensity to subjugate as well as to catalogue and classify the Other—can be seen as intimately related to the politico-economic and strategic geopolitical concerns of the ‘West’.

There are also, however, striking differences in the representations of Africa and Asia. The three previously enumerated divergences include: (1) The notion that Africa lacks all evolution and culture, while Asia has actually evolved from a previous state of cultural greatness (albeit one still inferior to that of the Occident); (2) The related cognitive under-development and childishness of the African; and (3) The obsession with the ‘under-evolved’ African body. Much like the Orientalist similarities, these divergences can also be theorized in relation to politico-economic and geopolitical considerations. It seems plausible that the hierarchical arrangement of Occident-Asia-Africa is related to the relatively strong economic and military position of the Asian Orient, and specifically, the Ottoman Empire, vis-à-vis both Europe and the African Orient. First, the Ottoman Empire was—prior to, and during the emergence of a large quantity of Asian Orientalist literature—seen as a threat to European dominance, due not only to its cultural and scientific dynamism during the European Dark Ages, but also to the perceived threat of Islam to the diffusion of Christianity. Second, the Ottoman Empire was generally expansionist, and its gradual conquest of the Balkans and Asia Minor again posed a threat to European global hegemony. Finally, the Ottomans’ armed resistance of the Crusades, their formidable sea power, as well as their active diplomatic pursuits, which “everywhere support[ed] forces opposed to the Papacy and the Habsburgs,”<sup>1</sup> posed a clear challenge to Europe’s ability to exercise control over world affairs. Thus, Occidental encounters with the Asian Orient and its Ottoman representative were historically characterized by economic and military rivalry, where Europe was not always in a position of absolute power.

Alternately, during European encounters with Africa in general, and Central and Southern Africa in particular, the former was typically in a position of power. Moreover, the native populations of Africa, unlike the Ottoman Empire, did not threaten Europe economically or militarily through expansion and annexation. Consequently, while European collective memory demanded a certain level of respect for the Asian Orient, no such necessity existed in relation to Africa. It was possible, thus, to represent the African as unsophisticated, cultureless and undeveloped, to an extent that collective memory would have prohibited in the case of the Asian Orient. Politico-economic and geopolitical considerations, therefore, seem to articulate with the discursive similarities and divergences of the Asian and African varieties of Orientalism. While the brief and superficial analysis provided in this section certainly does not supply an exclusive and exhaustive conclusion, it nevertheless offers a plausible point of departure for further analyses of the vital nexus between political economy and Orientalist discourse.

## CONCLUSION

The above analysis does not pretend to be a comprehensive scrutiny of ‘Western’ conceptualizations of Africa, nor is the irony of selecting a few passages from a limited number of texts, categorizing them, and portraying them as representative of a larger phenomenon lost on its author. The analysis simply offers one perspective on the historical construction of the African people and their continent by ‘Western’ scholars, administrators, explorers and writers. It attempts to expose the complexity of the ‘Othering’ structure, which fashions hierarchical gradations of inferiority to the untouchable Occident. The lens provided by this essay illuminates both the similarities and the differences between ‘Western’ constructions of Asia and Africa. It discusses the objectification of the subject matter, the tension between the proclivity to generalize and particularize, and the restrictive discursive framework that is common to both African

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1. *Ibid.*, 21.

and Asian Orientalism. At the same time, the analysis exposes some possible disparities in conceptualizations of the cultural, psychological and physical development and maturity of the Asians and Africans. Finally, an attempt is made at infusing analyses of Orientalism with politico-economic considerations. While the essay does not present an exhaustive or completely theorized analysis of the juncture of Orientalism and political economy, it offers a point of departure for further investigations.

“The real issue,” maintains Edward Said near the end of *Orientalism* (72), “is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they *are* representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer.” While some representations seem more accurate than others, perhaps the validity of each representation—this essay being but one of many—must be judged according to its ability to broaden the existing discursive space and consequently, participate in a critical and emancipatory praxis.

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