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Making Africa Accessible: Bringing Guinea-Bissau into the University Classroom

Brandon D. Lundy

OVERVIEW
A growing literature documents Africa’s history, its cultural diversity, and its contemporary trends. Meanwhile, accessible work on educational initiatives by individuals and institutions tackling problems of Afro-pessimism and Afro-ignorance are less common and yet no less important. This chapter gives examples of how firsthand ethnographic research in Africa can be brought into the classroom to foster a better understanding across the US/Africa cultural divide. What follows connects ground-level practices in a marginalized part of the world with issues that matter to American university students. Topics under discussion include: (1) female circumcision, (2) what makes a successful plural society, (3) religious syncretism, and (4) local links to global history. These themes are described in relation to a small village in southern Guinea-Bissau. This chapter demonstrates how American students can come to understand how Africa’s civil society is successfully navigating the margins of globalizing terrains.

INTRODUCTION
My brother came to visit me during my yearlong fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau, West Africa, in 2007. It was his first trip outside of the United States. He was making this journey in part to better inform his pedagogy as a middle school social studies teacher. Each year, he was
required to dedicate one month to teaching the African continent. His lesson plans, pulled from a few textbook chapters, were often his students’ first and only formal exposure to Africa over the next two years. As a university-level anthropology professor, I am acutely aware of the prodigious underexposure to “Africa” throughout the American education system, often further compounding misconceptions and stereotypes about the continent. I, therefore, wanted my brother’s experience to reflect the people I had come to know and respect, not the Western conceptions of exoticism and pessimism portrayed in the media, popular culture, and, regrettably, middle school textbooks.

In a similar vein, this chapter explores some of my own pedagogical practices in an attempt to make “Africa” accessible to an American audience. I do this by focusing on how I nurture specific partnerships between my research fieldsite community in southwestern Guinea-Bissau and my classrooms back in Kennesaw, Georgia. Before proceeding further, let me provide some necessary background about Guinea-Bissau and my home institution of Kennesaw State University.

About Guinea-Bissau

Guinea-Bissau is located along the Upper Guinea Coast of West Africa and shares a border with Senegal to the north and Guinea Conakry to the east. With a population of just over 1.5 million, Guinea-Bissau is a patchwork of approximately 33 different ethnic groups (Davidson 2002, 419).

Africanist historian Walter Rodney describes the people of Guinea-Bissau as refugees driven from their positions in the hinterland, who eventually settled along the coast where the mangroves and thick forests offered some natural protections from invaders (1970, 8).
Today’s plural society is a consequence of the Mali Empire’s expansion during the eleventh century, the subsequent rise of the semiautonomous kingdom of Kaabu, as well as European contact, Portuguese colonialism, and a protracted struggle for independence. Contemporary ethnic groups of Guinea-Bissau are “marked by a particular identity, history, language, cultural traits, and other distinct social features” (Forrest 2003, 28). Simultaneously, the overlapping history and cultural traditions, such as the shared Kriol language and nationalist sentiments, suggest complex webs of “multiethnic alliances, social linkages, and political ties” (Forrest 2003, 28), continuously fashioned, sustained, and abandoned throughout the centuries. As the country’s most influential revolutionary leader, Amílcar Cabral (1924-1973) helped to eliminate the Portuguese colonial presence in both Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau through armed struggle, while his intellectual efforts helped to create and unite a pluralistic society and undermine imperialism internationally (Chilcote 1991, 3). Cabral helped to cultivate national unity within Guinea-Bissau’s context of diversity.

The medley of ethnic groups making up Guinea-Bissau suggests to many contemporary scholars a potential site for research on heterogeneity, interethnic conflict, national destabilization, and balkanization. Anthropologist Joanna Davidson (2002, 419), however, remarks on the uncanny and “perplexing realization” that what one actually finds in the scholarly literature is that “relatively little interethnic conflict exists,” and, she continues, “attention to … ethnic based rivalries … is far outweighed by the recurring trope of Guinea-Bissau as a successful plural society.” I revisit this seeming contradiction later in the chapter.

It is within this context that I illustrate my research site (pop. 676), located in the Cacine sector of Guinea-Bissau’s southernmost Tombali region, for my American students. This area is considered to
be the patrimony of the recently Islamicized Nalú ethnic group, who claim territorial hegemony as the area’s first settlers. The Nalú population is divided by state borders between Guinea-Bissau and Guinea Conakry. They number less than 25,000 worldwide, with 134 living in two distinct neighborhoods in the research community. The other four neighborhoods support 542 spiritist Balanta who began to immigrate into the Cacine sector in 1939 from the northern Nhacra sector in search of food and arable land.

The Balanta are the single largest ethnic group in Guinea-Bissau, making up more than 30 percent of the entire population. They are generally considered egalitarian in sociopolitical organization (Hawthorne 2003). The Balanta continue to practice their own traditional religion, keep livestock, and cultivate rice. Although they find themselves in almost all corners of the country, Marina Padrão Temudo believes that the Balanta maintain an “isolationist rationale” (2009, 49) because they do not participate in trade networks, they value agricultural production over education, and they privilege their ethnic language over the more widely spoken Portuguese Kriol and ethnic Susu. Initiation is tightly controlled by the Balanta elders. At the same time, Balanta make up the majority of Guinea-Bissau’s military and are involved to some degree in local and national politics.

About Kennesaw State University

Originally founded in 1963 as Kennesaw Junior College, by 2009 Kennesaw State University (KSU) was the third-largest university in Georgia, with students representing more than 140 countries (www.kennesaw.edu). The university’s main campus is located in Kennesaw, Georgia, approximately 20 miles northwest of Atlanta.

KSU’s commitment to expanding the global experience of students, faculty, and staff is demonstrated by the 2007
Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) known as the “Get Global” initiative, focused on increasing opportunities for international learning experiences. By the spring of 2009, KSU awarded its first Global Engagement Certification to qualified students in recognition of their achievements in learning global perspectives and intercultural skills development.

KSU is a diverse mixture of traditional and nontraditional, residential and commuter students. For example, 31 percent of the students enrolled in 2010 identified as something other than “White, Non-Hispanic Origin,” while 6 percent were foreign nationals. Of these, 379 students self-reported their countries of origin to be one of 33 different African countries, with the top five being Nigeria (110 students), Kenya (86 students), Ghana (35 students), Cameroon (28 students), and South Africa (25 students) (KSU Fact Book 2010).

As of fall 2009, KSU employed 701 full-time and 553 part-time faculty. KSU’s Africanist faculty are found in more than 12 different departments and programs across several colleges, with expertise in more than 25 different African nations. The university supports an African and African Diaspora Studies program (AADS), in which many of these Africanists are affiliated. This depth of diversity and understanding about the African continent at KSU provides the faculty and students with an ideal site to continue to think about the relationships between the United States and Africa.

Pedagogical Approach

It is within this diverse institutional setting that I begin each of my courses by suggesting to the students that after sitting through my class, they should take away an appreciation for both humanity’s differences and similarities. My teaching, supervision, and mentoring are measured and evaluated according to two simple axioms that
inform my scholarship: (1) a unity exists between theory and practice and (2) educational experiences are processual in nature. I build on these axioms by encouraging contact between myself and students, developing reciprocity and cooperation among students, and encouraging active learning. I respect diverse talents, worldviews, and ways of learning among the student body by encouraging respectful classroom discussions among students after providing them with appropriate exposure to both competing and complementary materials on a given topic.

Similar to what is often experienced when doing ethnographic research, teachers face a wide range of attitudes, requiring sensitivity, patience, and tact. Teaching is more than the transference of knowledge and skills. Teaching involves nurturing critical thinking and giving students the resources to educate themselves in a safe environment. I believe that effective teaching must be primarily planned and conducted from the learner’s point of view.

It is with these pedagogical sentiments that I attempted to expand my brother’s own worldview and teaching repertoire by trying to arrange a successful interaction between my co-workers in Guinea-Bissau and my brother.

Once my brother landed in the capital city of Bissau, we made our way to the neighborhood of Bairro Militar where we would be spending the night at a friend’s house. I brought my brother a bucket of water to freshen up after his long journey. It was to be his first outdoor bucket bath. He stepped behind the three cement walls and rusted metal door. Shortly thereafter, to his dismay, 20 neighborhood kids congregated outside and began to make quite a commotion. When my brother, with his American modesty, finally exited the outdoor shower area, he was further unnerved when he saw a dead “bush rat” that had been flushed from the drain. He quickly realized that the
neighbor kids were killing the rat for its meat, not peeping through the crack in the door. (See Photograph 6.1.)

To my chagrin, with this incident I feared that many of those African stereotypes deeply embedded in my brother’s psyche were being reinforced, not dispelled. Similar difficulties arise when I am attempting to nurture critical thinking about the peoples and cultures of Africa in my own university classrooms. Challenging our preconceptions is a slow process, but the reward for thinking in cross-cultural terms about our ethnocentricities as well as our commonalities with other peoples is a valuable and necessary undertaking. So how can American educators go about changing these systematic stereotypes about the more than 50 countries and territories of Africa on both the individual and institutional levels? Further, what is the pedagogical value in such an undertaking?
Beginning in the 1960s, works about studying and, to a lesser degree, teaching Africa in the United States have been sponsored routinely by the African Studies Association (ASA), inspired primarily from a desire to better understand the newly emerging independent African nations. The focus of much of this early scholarship revolved around issues of cultural studies and the viability of African Studies programs in the United States after World War II (Alpers & Roberts 2002; Bowman 2002; Bowman and Cohen 2002; Guyer et al. 1996; McCann 2002; Vengroff 2002; Zeleza 1997).

By 2002, real revisions to traditional African studies in the United States were underway. For example, James C. McCann built upon Jane I. Guyer’s 1996 history of the African Studies movement in order to account for the most recent trends in which African studies moved beyond the federally funded area studies programs (i.e., Title VI) toward a “polycentric academic landscape” (2002, 35-36). This polycentric landscape of African pedagogy promotes the teaching of African issues to a wider US student-base with a greater potential for challenging misconceptions and stereotypes about the peoples and cultures of Africa. These histories were backed by several brief opinion pieces in the literature about teaching Africa to US undergraduates at a number of academic institutions and settings (Alpers 1995; Ansell 2002; Robson 2002; Thornton 2000).

Besides general works on African studies, it is not uncommon to find contributions in the literature dealing specifically with Africa in relation to particular disciplinary paradigms. One example of how the social sciences focus on Africa is Robert H. Bates et al.’s edited volume *Africa and the Disciplines: The Contributions of Research in Africa to the Social Sciences and Humanities* (1993), which...

Advancing the field of study between Africa and anthropology even further, Mwenda Ntaragwi, David Mills, and Mustafa Babiker’s edited volume *African Anthropologies: History, Critique and Practice* (2006) attempts to bridge the gap between Africa and the United States through an indigenous perspective on anthropology in Africa. It focuses on the history of anthropological training on the continent. These and similar works, however, remain limited in scope and often do not reach audiences outside of their own fields of study.

The literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning, on the other hand, has the potential to impact a much larger audience. The two most comprehensive multi- or cross-disciplinary works to date on the topic of teaching Africa to US undergraduates are Curtis Keim’s *Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind* (2009) and Misty L. Bastian and Jane L. Parpart’s edited volume *Great Ideas for Teaching about Africa* (1999). These resources are important for several reasons. First, they are multi- and cross-disciplinary, which makes them relevant to a larger number of individuals as well as broader in scope. Second, these books help to dispel mistaken assumptions and provide solid illustrations for teaching about Africa in a more appropriate and nuanced way.

Keim’s book, for example, is primarily dedicated to discussing what Africa is not. He suggests that “even if we want to avoid portraying Africa in stereotypical terms, we are bound to do so because we have few other models of Africa to which we can compare these images” (2009, 32). Keim argues that for a majority of Americans,
Africa and its people are simply marginal and often left out of the discussion altogether. This greatly worries him: “If, for example, we are wrong about Africa’s supposed insignificance, we will be blindsided by political, environmental, or even medical events that affect how we survive” (2009, 4). This hints at why Americans should care about issues beyond our egocentric interests, as demonstrated through the *tragedy of the commons*, where the immediate gratification of a few is mitigated through the dispersal of consequences over an entire population. As educators, we must consider global implications of our thoughts and actions (in both time and space) and then convey both the results of this exercise as well as the critical exercise itself to our students. In the case of Africa, Keim (2009, 9) continues, “We also perpetuate negative myths about Africa because they help us maintain dominance over Africans.... It doesn’t take much imagination to figure out that modern Americans who deal with Africa—bureaucrats, aid workers, businesspeople, missionaries, and others—might have an interest in describing Africa in ways that justify the importance of their own.”

Keim sheds light on these myths; for him, Africa becomes a cognitive exercise used to dispel misconceptions held by students. Keim’s book is primarily dedicated to refuting the many stereotypes Americans hold about Africa. He concludes by advocating for a renewed focus on diversity and respectful dialogue when it comes to Africa-centered pedagogy without saying how to achieve this important goal.

The second volume mentioned above, Bastian and Parpart’s (1999, 1) edited volume on teaching about Africa, is a wonderful pedagogical resource. Their volume demonstrates how “university-level instructors bring African issues and topics into their classrooms, breaking down stereotypical notions about the continent and engaging students with the variety, scope, and potential of societies on one
of the largest continents of the world.” While the book is an excellent next step in teaching following from Keim’s work, unfortunately, it is now more than 10 years old, and an update on Africa’s most recent global influence is now necessary. Much has changed in Western–African relations in the last 10 years including the rethinking of the neoliberal policies of the 1990s, the further advance of globalization, the rise of China, the development of AFRICOM, and much, much more. There have also been a number of new crises that students may have heard about; for example, the situations in Darfur and Congo, that merit classroom attention.

Why We Need Africa

Africa, the world’s second-largest and second-most-populous continent, surpassing one billion people today, is globally important, whether recognized as such by Americans or not. Africa is the birthplace of the human species, saw the rise and fall of some of the most powerful and far-reaching empires the world has ever known, and today has some of the Earth’s richest natural resources. Divided into 54 nations and territories, the African continent covers approximately 20 percent of the Earth’s total surface area. It is estimated that over 1,000 languages can be heard there. By 2050, one in every five people worldwide will be African.

The histories of the United States and Africa have been interwoven for more than five centuries. Today, the United States is cautiously forging new partnerships on the continent. Meanwhile, since the mid-1990s, China has made an all-out effort to gain favor in Africa, with considerable success. China’s influence is even surpassing that of the United States in some countries (Hilsum 2005; Klare and Volman 2006; Sautman and Hairong 2007; Seddon 2006; Taylor 1998; Tull 2006). Clearly, the continent of Africa is a major
international player, with its future having global stakes. And yet, for many American students, Africa remains the *Dark Continent*. So how can African specialists turn the spotlight on this fascinating and varied continent?

Collaboration among Africanists, students, and more than one billion Africans is our strongest option to encourage critical thinking about the continent. How can college and university students learn to recognize and incorporate the similarities, differences, and interconnections between the peoples of Africa and the United States? How can teacher-scholars foster global citizens who demonstrate respect and support for the common good of a diverse world community? And why bring African issues into Western, specifically US, classrooms? Let me briefly discuss three perspectives that I think are key.

First, students must begin to disaggregate Africa into its highly variable, and sometimes volatile, nations, states, cultural groups, institutions, and the like. In this way, they will begin to understand continental particularities that may or may not affect the entire global system and vice versa. This includes matters such as anti-Islamic sentiments here in the United States, issues of US military and strategic concern (Besteman 2008; Keenan 2008), petroleum needs (Klare and Volman 2006), and the war on drugs (Ellis 2009; International Crisis Group 2009; Singer 2008; UNODC 2007, 2008), just to name a few.

Second, on the individual level, an active research agenda is a strong enhancer of teaching effectiveness. Being able to speak about a research agenda from start to finish, with the kind of expertise that only comes from one’s own projects, is a wonderful, scholarly way to get students interested in a subject. It also lets them see the relevance of the work they are doing in class. While it is certainly possible to teach about culture and methodology without bringing up one’s own
research, I find that the topics come alive in class when lectures and in-class activities are based on personal experience. This often motivates students to read more and to consider further involvement in Africa and African issues. These classroom engagements help students understand what is occurring at the ground level in specific contexts, something they often cannot discover on their own, due to inadequate or out-dated library materials.

Third, teaching about Africa is a critical and a personal undertaking for those 35 million African Americans and more than 2.2 million foreign-born blacks in the United States today (Morris 2003, 255-256). For them, US and world history often fails to capture their multiple and overlapping political and historical experiences as people of African ancestry.

Africa is no longer simply a journalistic prop in the United States used to convey tales of the primitive “other.” I tend to agree with Nicola Ansell (2002, 357) when she writes, “What is needed, therefore, is a way of helping students interrogate their own images of Africa: to explore their origins, the ways they reflect historical and contemporary power relations and their relationships to the material circumstances of African people’s lives.”

Today, Africa is a continent on the rise in industry, technology, population, and innovation. Africa also has a rich and diverse history, which must be deeply explored and understood by any global institution looking to cultivate African understanding and alliances. Keim (2009, 12) reminds us, “Africa, because of its sheer size, population, resources, and modernization, will play an increasingly important role in the world, whether for good or ill, and will have to be taken seriously. Our long-term interest in our shrinking world is to understand Africa with as little bias as possible.” Just as importantly, Africa is diverse and offers alternatives to Western philosophy in political, economic, religious, and social thinking.
When it comes to teaching, I utilize my field research and advocacy to demonstrate to my students how diverse cultures can inform our own understanding of ourselves. Teaching is more than the transference of knowledge and skills. Teaching involves nurturing alternative worldviews and giving students the resources to educate themselves in a safe environment. The following are four classroom activities that I use to make Africa both accessible and relevant to my students by bringing Guinea-Bissau into the university classroom:

CLASSROOM APPROACHES

*Female Circumcision*

In order to expose a broader swath of students to African issues, the first exercise that I will discuss actually takes place in an undergraduate course not specifically related to the continent, called “Social Issues in Cultural Anthropology.” As the name implies, the course critically examines a common set of world social issues from an anthropological perspective. I begin with the hot button issue of female circumcision early in the semester to engage the students and to get them thinking in new ways. Although not a uniquely African phenomenon, many students incorrectly associate the practice with the continent, primarily as a result of high-profile media attention to African cases (e.g., Waris Dirie of Somalia) and general misinformation. As the particulars of the issues are examined, I foster a broader discussion of the topic in order to provide specific context for a debate over universal human rights versus cultural relativism. I also use this topic as a way to discuss the themes of power, agency, oppression, and resistance.

General discussion about female circumcision would be less useful without specific examples. Therefore, I provide students an
example of a particular case. First, after an appropriate warning to the class about the graphic nature of what I am about to present, I read a chapter titled “Cutting Time” from Mende Nazer’s 2003 autobiography *Slave: My True Story*. In this chapter, Nazer, a member of the Nuba people of the Sudan, recounts her infibulation in graphic detail. By the conclusion of the story, I find that most students who previously had relativistic tendencies, or no opinion, have now begun to question their views.

I then start to muddy their convictions by discussing a short piece from the December 28, 1996, *New York Times* titled “Tug of Taboos: African Genital Rite vs. American Law,” written by Celia W. Dugger. This article investigates the precarious bind for Somali refugees in the United States who want their daughters to be circumcised as their custom dictates even though they are forbidden to do so by US law. I ask the class why the US government has made female circumcision illegal while male circumcision is so accepted and commonplace. We also start to discuss elective and plastic surgery, such as labiaplasty or vaginoplasty, gender reassignment surgery, and the genital modification of intersexuals. We go on to talk about similarities with other forms of body modification in general, such as tattooing and piercing.

Finally, I bring the conversation to female circumcision practices in Guinea-Bissau by having them read Michelle C. Johnson’s article “Making Mandinga or Making Muslim? Debating Female Circumcision, Ethnicity, and Islam in Guinea-Bissau and Portugal.” The class mines the article for evidence on either side of the debate. Johnson’s article starts with a conversation with Binta who states, “People say that circumcision is a bad thing for women, but we know the truth. If a woman isn’t circumcised, she is unclean and her prayers are worthless. When you are circumcised, you become a true Muslim” (2007,
This article succeeds in adding religion and power relations into the conversation.

I conclude with an anecdote from my own ethnographic experience among the Nalú of southern Guinea-Bissau. When I first broached the topic of female circumcision with my closest Nalú friend and colleague in 2007, she said that they used to practice cutting in the past until Americans arrived in the village in the 1990s and “educated” them about the health risks and patriarchal implications of such customs. I was told that since that time, they had discontinued the practice.

Several months later after a hard day of working in the paddy rice fields; however, I learned from two fathers in the village that their youngest daughters had just gone through their finadu (a week-long rite of passage into female adulthood, including circumcision) the previous year, even though it was against the fathers’ wishes. I was eventually told by both male and female elders that the practice was a fairly recent thing among the Nalú, only found since their conversion to Islam in the twentieth century. It was currently being practiced by the female elders as a means of maintaining spiritual equality between the genders, a central part of traditional religion as demonstrated in their secret societies and the configuration of their sacred groves. The continued practice was later corroborated when I witnessed a group of young girls from a neighboring village go through the rite. (See Photograph 6.2.)
Finally, female circumcision in Guinea-Bissau was not always as ideologically motivated as many Americans would believe. In fact, I documented instances of girls from non-Islamic ethnic groups that did not practice circumcision who voluntarily accompanied their Muslim friends through the rite without parental consent. This suggests forms of inter-group peer pressure as a motivating factor in a girl’s decision to become circumcised. This anecdote introduces another facet to the conversation, one of gender roles. It contradicts the long-held argument that female circumcision was a practice invented by men to control women’s sexuality and wombs in order to guarantee the legitimacy of their offspring.

Guinea-Bissau as a Successful Plural Society?

I introduce another topic related to Africa in my undergraduate class “Cultures and Societies of the World.” I begin with a classroom
discussion by asking the following questions: (1) Does interethnic 
contact inevitably lead to assimilation or conflict? Why or why not? 
And (2) Are successful plural societies (i.e., societies combining eth-
nic contrasts, ecological specialization, and the economic interde-
pendence of groups) possible? What makes you think this way?

Next, I provide my students with a slide show and lecture about 
my own research among Guinea-Bissau’s Nalú and Balanta. The stu-
dents are then asked to write a one-page essay based on their predic-
tions about what they see happening to Guinea-Bissau and my re-
search community over the next 10 years. To facilitate this exercise, 
I provide the students with background information like that given 
earlier in the chapter about the country’s ethnic makeup and unique 
history.

Although the Nalú and Balanta differ substantially, they have 
been living in close proximity in southern Guinea-Bissau for almost a 
century. The Balanta would often tell me that the Nalú are a dif-
fident people whose villages remain close-knit, and semi-isolated. A 
majority of Nalú marriages are endogamous, and the Nalú retain a 
profound knowledge of the forest as powerful healers and herbalists. 
I was told that the Nalú don’t think like the rest of the world; “They 
are contrary.” “The Nalú are like a snake entering its hole. You think 
it goes in head first and you can grab it. But, it actually back tracks 
with its head to protect itself. No matter how close you get, you will 
ever really know the Nalú’s true nature” (personal communica-
tion, 09/01/2007). At the same time, the Nalú describe their Balanta 
nighbors as thieves and drunks, both in reference to their cultur-
al traditions involving alcohol as non-Muslims and to attempts by 
Balanta youths to demonstrate their prowess and readiness for their 
own initiation into adulthood by stealing cattle. And yet, the Balanta 
and Nalú of the research community seem to successfully coexist.
Because it is sometimes difficult for Western students to understand why cooperation may be a better strategy than competition in some cases, I conclude the class with a game that demonstrates lessons from game theory. This “X/Y” game is a modified version of *The Prisoner’s Dilemma* in which small groups explore the results of embracing collaboration in opposition to competition. Western culture has reinforced the idea that “winning” is all about the individual or team and dominating other individuals or teams. In this activity, if the cooperative path is chosen, all involved will experience the optimal outcome. Due to our competitive nature, however, what ensues instead, in the classroom is an arms race where, eventually, all involved lose. This activity encourages critical thinking, interpersonal and conceptual skills, communication skills, and global perspectives and engagement.

**Religious Syncretism**

Like most anthropologists, I discuss belief systems and religion in my “Introduction to Cultural Anthropology” course. By way of introducing the topic, I like to show a section of the documentary *Zeitgeist* that focuses on the syncretic origins of Christianity. My hope is that students will then start to think about religious systems as blended, or syncretic, instead of as discreet cosmologies that were independently invented. I then move into a discussion of differences between monotheistic and polytheistic religions. Specifically, I draw my students’ attention to the fact that monotheistic religions are inherently inflexible because according to their doctrine there can only be “one true God.” Polytheistic religions, on the other hand, are inherently flexible and accepting of others’ deities since they are often specialized, personal, and accessible. I then start a class-wide discussion by asking the students to consider what may result when a
monotheistic religious system comes into contact with a polytheistic one, such as what occurred when European missionaries began to visit Africa starting in the fifteenth century.

Next, I provide my students with an illustration of religious syncretism by discussing my research in Guinea-Bissau, a country whose religious make-up is described as approximately 45 percent indigenous beliefs, 50 percent Muslim, and 5 percent Christian, although a high degree of blending among these three belief systems is closer to reality.

I mention to the class that during my own ethnographic fieldwork, I documented the Islamic Nalú maintaining contacts with their ancestors at the baloba or sacred grove. I do this through both a brief lecture about the history of conversion in my research area and by talking about my own experiences through a slide show from my personal collection of images. (See Photograph 6.3.)

Photograph 6.3. The author learning about the sacred grove. Photograph by Brandon Lundy.

During this lecture, I ask students to think about their own beliefs. We conclude the lesson by discussing how, even within our own
seemingly inflexible monotheistic religious systems, there is room to negotiate our beliefs. I also draw their attention to the complex, yet significant, interrelationships between social structure, religion, economics, and politics.

**Local Links to Global History**

Another strategy that I employ in the classroom, and the last one that I will discuss in this chapter, is to draw parallels between my research in West Africa, historical assumptions, and my students’ localized knowledge. One way that I do this at KSU is by linking West African coastal rice production to Georgia’s agricultural history. For example, I introduce my students to the ethnographic fieldwork and historical linguistics of Edda Fields-Black (2008). She traces the prehistoric origins and development of tidal rice production along West Africa’s Rice Coast, particularly in the Rio Nunez region of coastal Guinea and explores its transfer to the New World during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, particularly to South Carolina and Georgia. (See Photograph 6.4.)

![Photograph 6.4. Rice planting. Photograph by Brandon Lundy.](image)
Fields-Black builds on Judith A. Carney’s 2001 groundbreaking work *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. Carney demonstrates through an exhaustive exploration into the historical and botanical records that the African rice knowledge system diffused across the Atlantic, shaping the cultures of the Americas beginning as early as the sixteenth century.

In encountering Carney’s many discoveries, students are often most surprised to learn that Thomas Jefferson experimented with red *Orzya glabberima* rice from the uplands of Guinea in West Africa in his search for a successful alternative to the lowland variety under cultivation in Virginia. He wished to move away from the lowland tidal swamps where the deadly effects of malaria, also imported from West Africa during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, were being felt. I recommend that my students visit the exhibit at the Black Madonna cultural center in downtown Atlanta that displays a flyer of a slave auction held in Georgia that advertised “slaves with rice knowledge” for sale.

We go on to discuss various ethnic groups’ roles in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and how these same Africans played a part in shaping contemporary Georgia by making historical and localized connections. Confronting students with revised histories (Thornton 2000) provides them with valuable lessons and a critical tool kit on which to draw inspiration when questioning Eurocentric accounts of world history throughout their academic careers.

CONCLUSION: ONE WEEK LATER …

Changing people’s attitudes about anything is not an easy task. Changing long-held stereotypes that have pervaded popular culture proves especially difficult. Many Africanists are taking on this very task because they realize the implications of not recognizing
the global significance of such a large and diverse continent as Africa. Educators at all levels are beginning to innovate the teaching of cultural studies, especially in relation to so many potential cross-cultural partnerships. Let me conclude by returning to my brother’s visit to Guinea-Bissau in his attempt to bring real insights on Africa into his middle school social studies class.

After an exceptional evening meal that consisted of goat served five different ways, my brother and I turned in for the night. We were given the only room in the cement house with a door, which turned out to be the master suite. Hospitality is a way of life in Guinea-Bissau, and my brother was overwhelmed by our hosts’ generosity. That night we slept comfortably under our mosquito net, with an electric fan keeping us cool. We awoke to bucket baths and a breakfast of goat while we waited for the car that would take us southward. After an exhausting drive lasting all day, we finally arrived at my field site that evening.

As had been my original experience, the villagers warmly welcomed my brother. He had the opportunity to visit the local schoolhouse, play football with the neighborhood kids, swim at the nearby beach, and attempt to communicate in broken Spanish with the villagers’ Portuguese-based Kriol. They held a dance in his honor; and, being a fraternity brother, he drank cashew wine with the neighboring spiritist Balanta villagers. He spent the remainder of his days in Guinea-Bissau finding the “familiar in the strange” as we moved about the country until it was time for him to return home.

It is this lesson that he now conveys to his students in his middle school classroom. He no longer solely teaches Africa from the textbook. My brother teaches his students about the village in southern Guinea-Bissau where he attended school, played football, danced, swam, and even drank the local wine. He portrays the story of his visit through a slide show and helps his students begin to recognize
the “familiar in the strange,” as he had done. “We are all humans with certain needs,” he says. “It is just how we go about meeting those needs that can change from place to place.”

This is just one of the many reasons there needs to be a change in the US education system at all levels in an attempt to “pluralize the curriculum” (Hilliard III 1991) by teaching Africa in the classroom. This chapter builds on the work of more traditional African Studies programs by promoting the teaching of African themes in a wider array of courses, not just those dedicated to Africa. As the need to understand the diverse patterns and processes of African peoples increases in the United States in order for our students to become better global citizens who are able to engage with a global world system, this polycentric attitude toward teaching at the university level is currently our strongest approach. By collaborating across the disciplines, and across the Atlantic, a new multi-positioned discourse allows teachers and students to draw on different perspectives that bear upon the study of Africa, leading to a developed capacity to think critically about the world around us.

REFERENCES


