



AFRIC


THE *SECRET* HISTORY



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As the BBC launches a major new TV series on the history of Africa, the programme's producer and presenter **Zeinab Badawi** explains why such an undertaking is important in reshaping our view of the continent's history

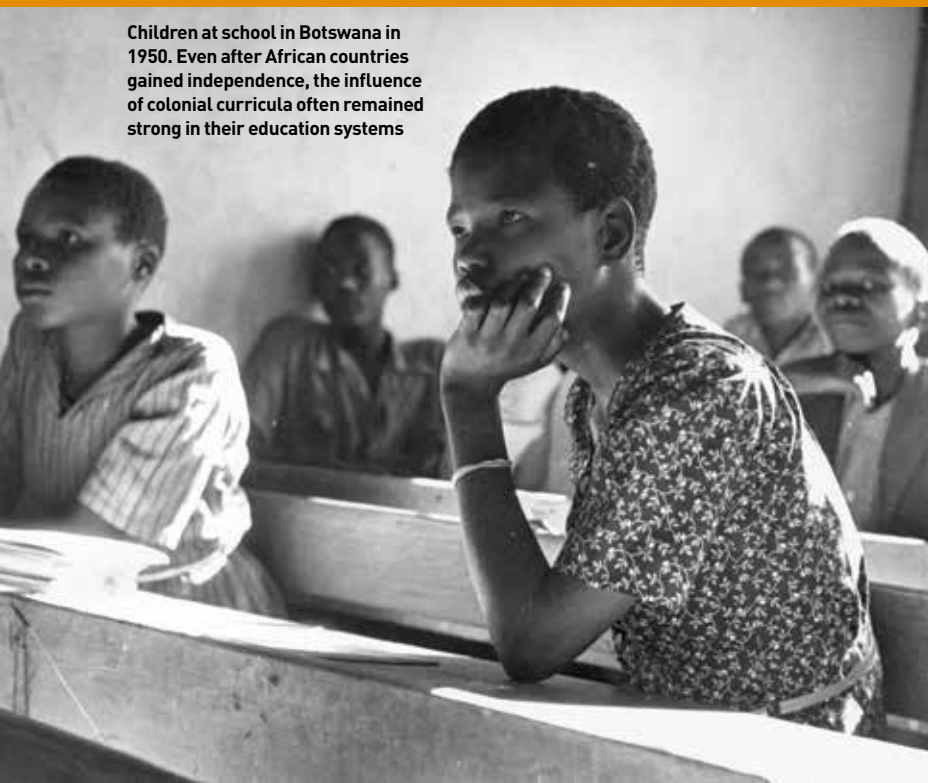
INTERVIEW BY **MATT ELTON**



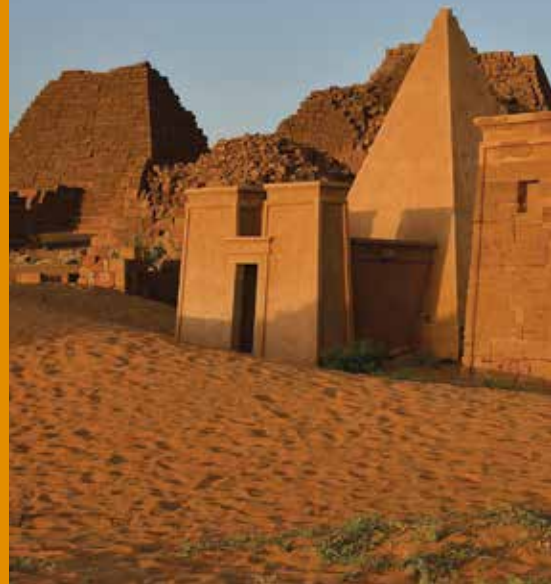
Statues of pharaohs from the Nubia region (in what's now Egypt and Sudan), home to one of Africa's earliest civilisations. A new BBC TV series explores the continent's ancient history, often obscured in recent retellings by later crises and conflicts



Children at school in Botswana in 1950. Even after African countries gained independence, the influence of colonial curricula often remained strong in their education systems



Pyramids in a necropolis in the ancient Kushitic city of Meroë, now in Sudan. Africa's earliest history has often been obscured by its more recent upheavals, argues Zeinab Badawi



The History of Africa is a project that came about by a process of osmosis.

I've always had a passion for history, and have always loved looking at monuments, stones and bones – as well as the people who create history. I'm very people-orientated.

What got me particularly interested in the ancient history of Africa was a moment that came back to me when, sadly, my father died last year at the age of 91. Both of my parents were highly educated, and both had been through the British colonial school system in Sudan, where I was born (I left Africa when I was two years old).

Some time ago, after returning home to the UK after visiting the pyramids and temples of Sudan, I asked my parents what they knew of their country's historic sites. They couldn't really tell me very much, and I thought something wasn't right with that – particularly because both of them could tell you a lot about Henry VIII and key points in British history. If my parents didn't know enough about their own history,

I thought, surely the same is likely to be true of African people of all generations. And, as I talked to various people over the years, I discovered that was the case.

A few years later I was at Unesco's headquarters in Paris, in the office of the deputy director-general, Getachew Engida. Spotting a collection of volumes on his bookshelves, I asked what it was; he told me that it was the *General History of Africa*. The books were the result of a project conceived in the early 1960s, during the period of rapid decolonisation in Africa. Some of the newly independent African leaders got together and decided that, now they had decolonised their countries, they also wanted to decolonise their history. Unesco helped them put together the project, recruiting 350 experts, mostly from across Africa and from a range of disciplines, to compile eight volumes, starting from prehistory and continuing to the modern era. The eighth volume was completed in 1990, and they're now working on the ninth.

I suggested to Getachew that it would be amazing to produce a TV series based on the information in these volumes. It took me a while to negotiate with Unesco, but that link is important because this is a unique project – African history written by Africans. Although you can't film a TV series based entirely on scholarly volumes, I have used them as inspiration, incorporating experts and citizens speaking about their histories and how their lives in the present day tie in with the past. I interviewed a number of contributors to the volumes, too. It's something of a novelty to hear a Tunisian talking in her own language about her own history, and so on.

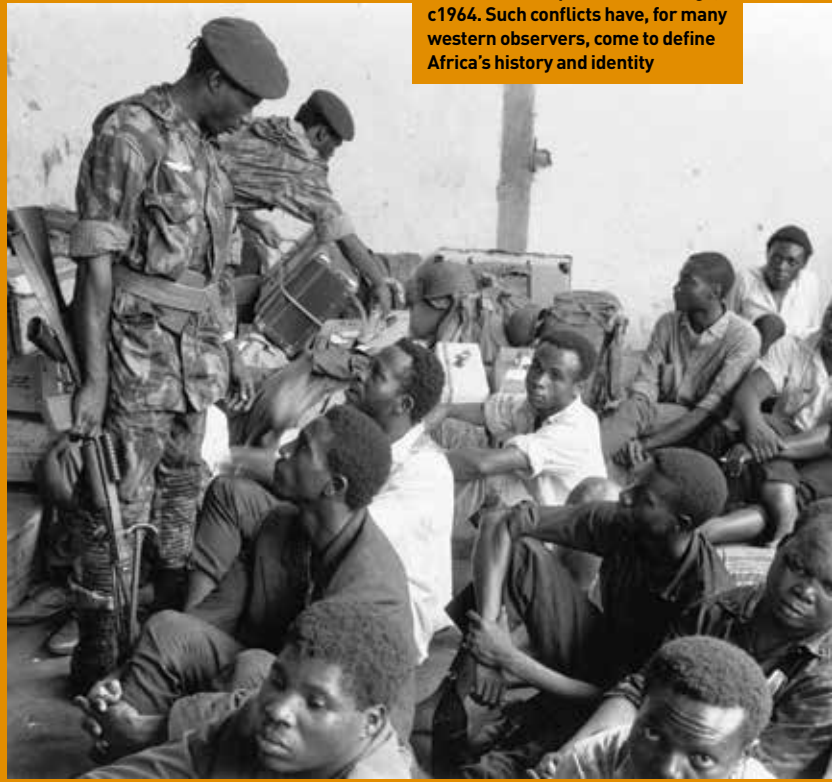
This history is little known, both in Africa and elsewhere, because a lot of academics and teachers in African countries were and are a product of colonial education themselves.

As I say, my parents were fluent in English, and highly educated, but by and large were taught western curricula. So even when they looked at their own

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Soldiers detain rebels during civil unrest in the Republic of the Congo, c1964. Such conflicts have, for many western observers, come to define Africa's history and identity



“Africa has been infantilised to a degree that we haven’t seen in any other region of the world”

history, it would have been through the perspectives of western scholars.

It’s interesting that all of the academics I interviewed for this series had degrees or PhDs from western universities. They are obviously able to transcend the western perspective to a large extent, but not completely. It takes a while to decolonise curricula designed in the colonial era.

The fact that very few people know about the volumes also tells you something. Even I didn’t know about them until a few years ago – the *General History of Africa* was Unesco’s best-kept secret. You wonder why leaders didn’t want to shine more light on it. I’m not suggesting there was a conspiracy, of course – just that there wasn’t enough emphasis placed on African history by either African or non-African leaders.

This series is particularly important now, in 2017, because we have become much more accustomed to having a global conversation. This is reflected in the media, in social media, in the

fact that travel has made the world a lot smaller. I think that people are starting to see that, for so many years, the western view has been *the* view of the world. But in the 21st century that has been challenged by the emergence of the internet, which has awakened an interest in gaining knowledge and improving understanding by using first-hand sources from other countries.

This is of particular interest for Africa, though, because it has been infantilised to a degree that we haven’t seen in any other region of the world. This is partly because there has been a way of seeing Africa in terms of poverty and conflict – the coup, the war, the famine, the corruption – which has become a kind of shorthand for the continent that still persists today.

Development issues in Africa still, to a large extent, emphasise charitable aspects and aid. Although this is done with the best will in the world, and with charitable intentions, it has fed into an infantilisation of Africa whereby it’s assumed that, in order for its people to





Columns in the temple of the god Amun-Re at Karnak near Luxor, Egypt. Badawi suggests that many African people have a knowledge of the key figures of British history but are less aware of the histories of their own nations

While making the series, Badawi spoke to people in Africa about how they viewed their past. "Most people engage with history through characters and people," she argues



develop, and for them to have enough to eat, they have to rely on outsiders.

Although these kneejerk stereotypes are being broken down, it doesn't take much for them to reemerge. When the Ebola crisis broke out earlier this decade, for instance, thinking quickly turned to what people from outside the continent could do. Yet, though of course wonderful nurses and medical staff came from Europe and North America, Ebola-stricken countries were largely helped by local people. That kind of thing is easily overlooked, and it doesn't take long for us to fall back into the comfortable, familiar way of looking at Africa.

As someone who was born in Africa, and who came to the UK as an infant, I have the benefit of understanding both cultures. When African people find out that I work for the BBC, they often complain they are fed up of how the media treats Africa: that as soon as something happens, some non-African person is sent in to sum up the situation

for western audiences. I would say that Africans have to seize control of their narrative in the present – but to do that, they also have to gain control of the narrative of their history that they have been denied in the past.

It's also important to consider how the African diaspora considers its history. As part of my agreement with Unesco, these programmes will be made available free of charge to all state TV stations in Africa, Brazil and the Caribbean, because this story is important for their identities, too.

One of the other reasons that Africa's early history has been overlooked is that the world's most powerful African diaspora is the African-American diaspora. Its members, understandably, have been preoccupied with slavery, its legacy, and the civil rights movement. It's obviously very important to understand that these are of critical significance for African-Americans. However, I think that perhaps it's meant that the history

“Slavery and the civil rights movement are important topics, but Africa's story started thousands of years BC”



The remains of an ancient settlement in Kerma, Sudan. The kingdom of which it was a part predates the cultures of Babylon and Rome

of Africa before slavery has not received enough attention. For instance, when discussions take place about introducing Africa to the history curriculum at the University of Oxford, there's talk about covering Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and the civil rights movement. These are important topics, and relevant to 20th-century African history, but the continent's story started thousands of years BC. I would argue, therefore, that we shouldn't just look at Africa's history during the time of slavery and the colonial era.

The popular focus on that era may also be partly because mainstream Hollywood or European films [about Africa and African-Americans and their experiences] tend to be anchored in stories of slavery or civil rights. I would love to make an epic movie based on the kingdom of Kush in ancient Sudan for instance – or about the kingdom of Kerma [in present-day Sudan], which predates Rome and Babylon. Virtually nobody has heard of either, of course!

There are many challenges inherent in telling a history of the entirety of Africa. It's difficult to condense things into TV documentaries, bearing in mind that each volume of the *General History* contains tens of thousands of words. The challenge is to work out what is of most interest to both the African and non-African viewer. In television terms, it's about visualising key events of which no images may be available, and looking at monuments and artefacts in a way that tells you about the people behind them. Most people engage with history not through stones and bones but through characters and people; for that reason, the challenge was to bring to life the historical figures. I did that principally through interacting with people from the continent today, and allowing them to bring to life their own history.

Another problem is that today we think of history in terms of nation states, but of course I'm looking back into the far reaches of time, when there were no countries. So I have taken a regional,

chronological approach to a large part of the series. The other challenge is that, sadly, in some parts of Africa there is conflict, and it wasn't always safe for me to film everywhere.

I can't do everything in a TV series, of course. I'm really hoping for three things from the series: to teach people a bit about Africa's history; to excite them and leave them wanting to know more; and, where I can, to entertain them. Of course, my overall objective is to develop a more holistic look at Africa's history

– and to change the way that Africa is seen. 🌍



Zeinab Badawi is a journalist, presenter and chair of the Royal African Society

DISCOVER MORE

The History of Africa will be broadcast on BBC World Service TV channel in July. Hear more from this interview on the World Histories podcast: historyextra.com/podcasts