

# Ancient Africa in World Economic History

Christopher Ehret

We are all Africans

# We are all Africans

- Our common ancestral human communities—the ancestors of all of us alive everywhere in the world today—lived in eastern Africa around 70,000 years ago.

# We are all Africans

- Our common ancestral human communities—the ancestors of all of us alive everywhere in the world today—lived in eastern Africa around 70,000 years ago.
- From that eastern region of Africa, the descendants of those common ancestors of all of us, no later than around 50,000 years ago, began to spread out to the rest of the world and also to the rest of the African continent.

# African Diversity

- As befits this history—of Africa as the origin continent of us all—Africa is not the continent of some single kind of people.

# African Diversity

- As befits this history—of Africa as the origin continent of us all—Africa is not the continent of some single kind of people.
- Africa in its human genetics is in fact *the most diverse* continent of all

# African Diversity

- As befits this history—of Africa as the origin continent of us all—Africa is not the continent of some single kind of people.
- Africa in its human genetics is in fact *the most diverse* continent of all
- The ancestors of all those humans who moved out into the rest of the world represent just one subset of that African diversity

*Africa has not been some isolated part of the world*



## *Africa has not been some isolated part of the world*

- Those of our ancestors who spread out after 50,000 years ago across the rest of Africa did not become backward, unchanging people

## *Africa has not been some isolated part of the world*

- Those of our ancestors who spread out after 50,000 years ago across the rest of Africa did not become backward, unchanging people
  - That idea is self-serving nonsense invented by people who, during the past 400 years, needed to justify their enslavement of other human beings.

## *Africa has not been some isolated part of the world*

- Those of our ancestors who spread out after 50,000 years ago across the rest of Africa did not become backward, unchanging people
  - That idea is self-serving nonsense invented by people who, during the past 400 years, needed to justify their enslavement of other human beings.
- The fact is, Africans were participants in, and contributors to, all the major transitions and developments leading down to the world we live in today.

## Africans and the great subsistence transition

- Between 10,000 and 5,000 BCE, a major world economic transition began—a transition fundamental in enabling all the rest of the major economic developments that have transpired since then—

## Africans and the great subsistence transition

- Between 10,000 and 5,000 BCE, a major world economic transition began—a transition fundamental in enabling all the rest of the major economic developments that have transpired since then—
- Independently during this period, peoples living in at least eleven or twelve separate and distant parts of the world set in motion a transformational shift in the *primary economy* of human life—

## Africans and the great subsistence transition

- Between 10,000 and 5,000 BCE, a major world economic transition began—a transition fundamental in enabling all the rest of the major economic developments that have transpired since then—
- Independently during this period, peoples living in at least eleven or twelve separate and distant parts of the world set in motion a transformational shift in the *primary economy* of human life—
  - the shift from foraging to agricultural ways of life

## Africans and the great subsistence transition

- Between 10,000 and 5,000 BCE, a major world economic transition began—a transition fundamental in enabling all the rest of the major economic developments that have transpired since then—
- Independently during this period, peoples living in at least eleven or twelve separate and distant parts of the world set in motion a transformational shift in the *primary economy* of human life—
  - the shift from foraging to agricultural ways of life
- Africans in three different regions of Africa independently brought agriculture into being during that historical age

Where did these African contributions emerge?

## Where did these African contributions emerge?

- In West Africa, among societies speaking early languages of the Niger-Congo language family—

## Where did these African contributions emerge?

- In West Africa, among societies speaking early languages of the Niger-Congo language family—
  - The early farming crops of the Niger-Congo peoples would have included fonio, pearl millet, African (or ‘Bambara’) groundnuts, and cowpeas (or ‘black-eyed peas’ as we call them in the United States)
  - Yams later became additional crops of major importance

Where else did these African contributions emerge?

## Where else did these African contributions emerge?

- In the eastern parts of the Sudan belt of Africa, among people speaking languages of the Nilo-Saharan language family—
  - Early crops of this agriculture included, most notably, sorghum, along with pearl millet and watermelons

## Where still else did agriculture originate in Africa?

- In the southern highlands of today's Ethiopia, among people speaking languages of the Omotic language group—

## Where still else did agriculture originate in Africa?

- In the southern highlands of today's Ethiopia, among people speaking languages of the Omotic language group—
  - The major early crop in this agriculture was the *insät* (or *enset*) plant, the corms of which formed the staple of the diet

# Africa in the history of technology

- Africans living deep in Africa were direct contributors to the major lines of early human technological invention leading down to the world we live in today

## Heat-based technologies

- A foundational step in the development of technologies using heat to change the chemistry of materials was the invention of the first **ceramics**

## Heat-based technologies

- A foundational step in the development of technologies using heat to change the chemistry of materials was the invention of the first **ceramics**
- People in east Asia took this first step around 20,000 years ago.

## Heat-based technologies

- A foundational step in the development of technologies using heat to change the chemistry of materials was the invention of the first **ceramics**
- People in east Asia took this first step around 20,000 years ago.
- But it was Africans who, independently, invented both *the second* **and** *the third earliest* ceramic technologies in world history—

## Heat-based technologies

- A foundational step in the development of technologies using heat to change the chemistry of materials was the invention of the first ceramics
- People in east Asia took this first step around 20,000 years ago.
- But it was Africans who, independently, invented both *the second* **and** *the third earliest* ceramic technologies in world history—
  - By early speakers of Niger-Congo languages in today's Mali by or before 9500 BCE—

## Heat-based technologies

- A foundational step in the development of technologies using heat to change the chemistry of materials was the invention of the first ceramics
- People in east Asia took this first step around 20,000 years ago.
- But it was Africans who, independently, invented both *the second* **and** *the third earliest* ceramic technologies in world history—
  - By early speakers of Niger-Congo languages in today's Mali by or before 9500 BCE—*3,000 years before* the Middle East had ceramics and even longer before this technology reached Europe

## Heat-based technologies

- A foundational step in the development of technologies using heat to change the chemistry of materials was the invention of the first ceramics
- People in east Asia took this first step around 20,000 years ago.
- But it was Africans who, independently, invented both *the second* **and** *the third earliest* ceramic technologies in world history—
  - By early speakers of Niger-Congo languages in today's Mali by or before 9500 BCE—*3,000 years before* the Middle East had ceramics and even longer before this technology reached Europe
  - And to the east, in today's Sudan, around 8500 BCE (by speakers of Nilo-Saharan languages)

## Mechanical invention: An African first

## Mechanical invention: An African first

- The first invention of the weaving of cotton textiles took place in the eastern Sudan belt of Africa, already around or before 5,000 BCE—
  - Earlier than in India, which historians have usually thought of as the earliest place.

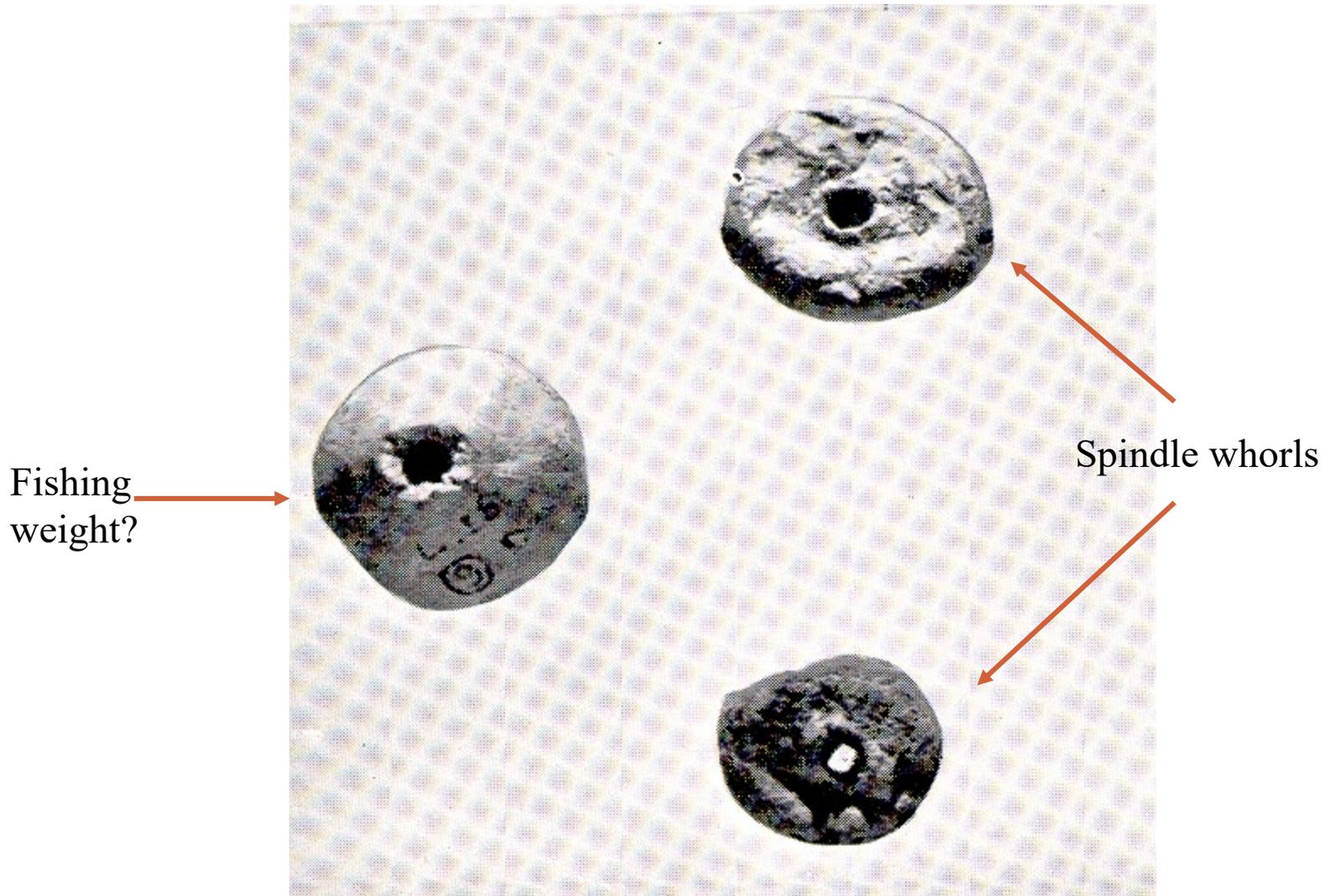
## Mechanical invention: An African first

- The first invention of the weaving of cotton textiles took place in the eastern Sudan belt of Africa, already around or before 5,000 BCE—
  - Earlier than in India, which historians have usually thought of as the earliest place.
- The archaeological evidence for this invention comes from an archaeological site close to Khartoum in the modern-day country of Sudan.

## Mechanical invention: An African first

- The first invention of the weaving of cotton textiles took place in the eastern Sudan belt of Africa, already around or before 5,000 BCE—
  - Earlier than in India, which historians have usually thought of as the earliest place.
- The archaeological evidence for this invention comes from an archaeological site close to Khartoum in the modern-day country of Sudan.
- Here are images of those archaeological finds:

# Spindle whorls for making cotton threading



## And not only cotton weaving—

- 2,000 kilometers to the west, in what is today southern Nigeria, Niger-Congo-speaking peoples—almost as early, by possibly 4,000 BCE—separately and independently invented another kind of loom technology

## And not only cotton weaving—

- 2,000 kilometers to the west, in what is today southern Nigeria, Niger-Congo-speaking peoples—almost as early, by possibly 4,000 BCE—separately and independently invented another kind of loom technology
  - Its product, raffia cloth
  - Along with a vertical broad loom, quite different from the horizontal loom used in cotton textile weaving

## And not only cotton weaving—

- 2,000 kilometers to the west, in what is today southern Nigeria, Niger-Congo-speaking peoples—almost as early, by possibly 4,000 BCE—separately and independently invented another kind of loom technology
  - Its product, raffia cloth
  - Along with a vertical broad loom, quite different from the horizontal loom used in cotton textile weaving
- Key historical significance: raffia cloth became a major, highly valued product from early times in the history of African commerce

# Africa in world metallurgical history

## Africa in world metallurgical history

- From recent archaeological finds, it also now appears that Africans, living in what is today the western Central African Republic, invented the earliest ironworking technology in world history, as early as 2,000 BCE.

## Africa in world metallurgical history

- From recent archaeological finds, it also now appears that Africans, living in what is today the western Central African Republic, invented the earliest ironworking technology in world history, as early as 2,000 BCE.

(A separate invention of ironworking—the one which all our history books talk about—took place almost as early in what is today the country of Turkey.)

## Africa in world metallurgical history

- From recent archaeological finds, it also now appears that Africans, living in what is today the western Central African Republic, invented the earliest ironworking technology in world history, as early as 2,000 BCE.

(A separate invention of ironworking—the one which all our history books talk about—took place almost as early in what is today the country of Turkey.)

- From that African beginning, iron technology then spread, over the course of the next 2,000 years, across the rest of continent south of the Sahara.

# Examples of African ironworking

Throwing knife



Flange-welded double bell



And—in addition—

## And—in addition—

- African smelters in East Africa—already around 2,000 years ago—discovered how to construct furnaces that generated such hot temperatures that they could produce carbon steel directly from the smelt.

## And—in addition—

- African smelters in East Africa—already around 2,000 years ago—discovered how to construct furnaces that generated such hot temperatures that they could produce carbon steel directly from the smelt.
  - Chinese smelters had developed this capacity by around a thousand years ago.
  - But Westerners did not gain this capacity until the adoption of the Bessemer process, little more than a century and a half ago.

Another key thing to understand:  
The Sahara desert was not a barrier cutting the rest of  
Africa off from world history

Another key thing to understand:  
The Sahara desert was not a barrier cutting the rest of  
Africa off from world history

- Notable cases on point:
  - Between 4000 and 500 BCE, at least eleven food crops domesticated by Africans in West Africa, the eastern Sudan, and the Horn of Africa spread out of Africa and into often distant parts of Eurasia

Another key thing to understand:  
The Sahara desert was not a barrier cutting the rest of  
Africa off from world history

- Notable cases on point:
  - Between 4000 and 500 BCE, at least eleven food crops domesticated by Africans in West Africa, the eastern Sudan, and the Horn of Africa spread out of Africa and into often distant parts of Eurasia
  - As did one African domesticated animal, the donkey, of particular economic consequence in enabling the early long-distance overland transport of goods and people

- Of these African contributions, at least four African crops—
  - watermelons
  - bottle gourds
  - muskmelons
  - cowpeas
- spread north to Egypt as early as the fourth and third millennia BCE—and subsequently from Egypt into the Middle East and far beyond.

- By the third millennium BCE a widening spread of crops out of Africa was underway, especially to the Indian subcontinent; notable examples:
  - *pearl millet*
  - *sorghum*
  - the *lablab bean*
  - *finger millet* (domesticated in the Ethiopia highlands)
  - *tamarind*

- Other African crops spread still farther east, across southeast Asia—
  - the country potato, and
  - roselle
- Sorghum spread farthest, all the way to north China, where it became one of the primary crops of north Chinese agriculture.

And that's not all—

- In another major development of prime significance in world economic history—

## And that's not all—

- In another major development of prime significance in world economic history—
  - As early as 1800-1000 BCE, Africans widely across the Sudan belt of Africa were creating networks of long-distance trade
  - With skilled artisans and merchants, and with towns as the focal places of manufacturing

## And that's not all—

- In another major development of prime significance in world economic history—
  - As early as 1800-1000 BCE, Africans widely across the Sudan belt of Africa were creating networks of long-distance trade
  - With skilled artisans and merchants, and with towns as the focal places of manufacturing
  - Here are the ruins of one such early West African town dating back to the second millennium BCE

Ruins of a 2nd-millennium BCE town  
in Tichitt in far southern Mauretania



## And that's not all—

- Between 1000 and 500 BCE—
  - these African networks of commerce began to link up with the other networks of commercial exchange—networks which had been emerging during the same eras in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean regions

## And that's not all—

- Between 1000 and 500 BCE—
  - these African networks of commerce began to link up with the other networks of commercial exchange—networks which had been emerging during the same eras in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean regions
    - Goods began to pass along several trans-Saharan routes of travel

## And that's not all—

- Between 1000 and 500 BCE—
  - these African networks of commerce began to link up with the other networks of commercial exchange—networks which had been emerging during the same eras in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean regions
    - Goods began to pass along several trans-Saharan routes of travel
    - Goods also moved by land and sea connections from today's Sudan and the Horn of Africa into the Red Sea and Indian Ocean networks.

- So, to sum up—
- Africa has not at all been a continent somehow cut off from the rest of humanity.

- So, to sum up—
- Africa has not at all been a continent somehow cut off from the rest of humanity.
- It has not been some backward set of lands and peoples, isolated and unchanging—however much the colonialists, and the slavers before them, might have wished that to be true.

- So, to sum up—
- Africa has not at all been a continent somehow cut off from the rest of humanity.
- It has not been some backward set of lands and peoples, isolated and unchanging—however much the colonialists, and the slavers before them, might have wished that to be true.
- Africa has instead been a continent of peoples who actively contributed to and participated in the formative long-term developments of human technological and economic history.

## Gender and Economy

- And there is another kind of lesson that African history can impart—a lesson of considerable importance for planning and carrying out investment and development—

## Gender and Economy

- And there is another kind of lesson that African history can impart—a lesson of considerable importance for planning and carrying out investment and development—
  - In the lands all across southern Eurasia, from farthest east Asia in the east to Iberia in the west, patriarchal societies have been the norm for thousands of years—societies in which women’s agency and initiative have been devalued and hindered.

## Gender and Economy

- And there is another kind of lesson that African history can impart—a lesson of considerable importance for planning and carrying out investment and development—
  - In the lands all across southern Eurasia, from farthest east Asia in the east to Iberia in the west, patriarchal societies have been the norm for thousands of years—societies in which women’s agency and initiative have been devalued and hindered.
  - But in Africa south of the Sahara, women have not necessarily been historically subordinated to men—despite the tendency of Westerners and other outsiders to assume so.

- Whether in patrilineal or matrilineal societies, women from far back into the African past were, and continue today to be, independent social and economic actors.

- Whether in patrilineal or matrilineal societies, women from far back into the African past were, and continue today to be, independent social and economic actors.
- In the trades and occupations that women carried out, they were the owners of the products of their labor.

- Whether in patrilineal or matrilineal societies, women from far back into the African past were, and continue today to be, independent social and economic actors.
- In the trades and occupations that women carried out, they were the owners of the products of their labor.
- The major commercial entrepreneurs in recent centuries in, for example, Nigerian history, have very often been women.

- Whether in patrilineal or matrilineal societies, women from far back into the African past were, and continue today to be, independent social and economic actors.
- In the trades and occupations that women carried out, they were the owners of the products of their labor.
- The major commercial entrepreneurs in recent centuries in, for example, Nigerian history, have very often been women.
- And these entrepreneurs have included not just followers of the older African religions, but also Muslim and, more recently, Christian women as well.

- Early African history is a much more complex set of stories than we could come close to presenting here even if we had far more time.
- But I hope what we have considered here will help widen our perspectives and perhaps have practical consequences for economic practice.

- For those wishing to delve more deeply into the wide sweep of the African past, two recent books of mine may be of interest:
  - *The Civilizations of Africa: A History to 1800* (University of Virginia Press, 2016)
  - *Ancient Africa: A Global History* (Princeton University Press, expected later this year; title still provisional)