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Big History
Association

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Seikou Susso
West African griot

*Photo by
York Minster Cathedral*

Members' Newsletter

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Cosmic Safari (Part 2): What Big History Can Learn From African History

by

Christian Jennings

This two-part article explains how a historian of Africa gradually came to identify himself primarily as a proponent of Big History. The first part in last month's newsletter narrated the story of how he came to realize that his research in African history pointed inevitably to the fundamental concerns of Big History. In this second part, he argues that African history is a natural ally of Big History.

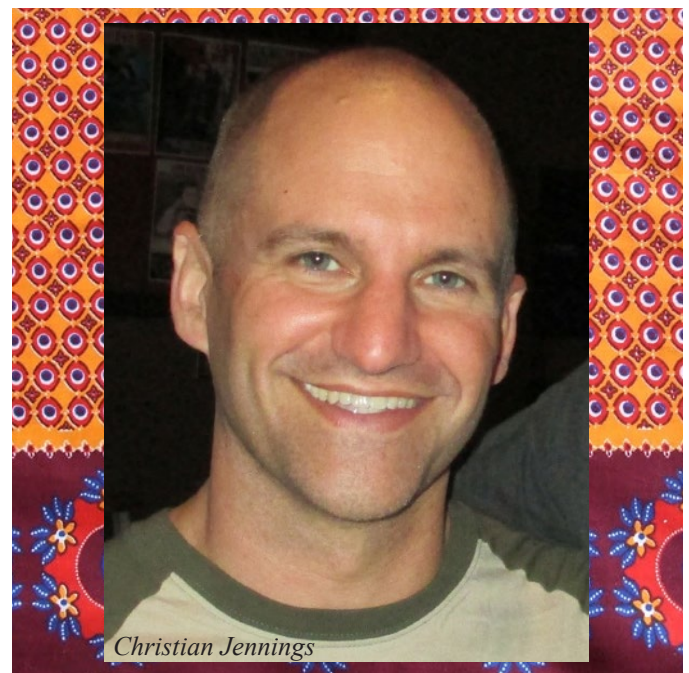
Millions of people had their first glimpse of Big History when astronomer Carl Sagan strolled across a three-dimensional "cosmic calendar" during the second episode of *Cosmos*, his immensely popular 1980 public television series. It must have seemed new and exciting to much of his audience, but Sagan had been testing the calendar as a teaching device for several years. He had used it in the first chapter of *The Dragons of Eden*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning book published in 1977. Before that, he had introduced it in a column published in the December 1975 issue of *Natural History* magazine.

The cosmic calendar imagines the history of the universe as taking place in a single calendar year, with the Big Bang on 1 January and the present moment as midnight on 31 December. Important developments in our cosmic history are then filled in: the formation of the Milky Way galaxy on 1 May; the origin of the solar system on 9 September; the origin of life on our planet on 25 September. Humanity appears at 10:30pm on 31 December and all of human history takes place in the next ninety minutes. The point, as Sagan wrote in *Natural History*, is to impress upon us that "the world is very old and human beings are very young."

Readers of *Natural History* might have found their eyes drawn to an advertisement on page seventy-one, next to Sagan's prediction that "what happens on or near the earth at the beginning of the second cosmic year will depend on the scientific wisdom and the sensitivity of mankind." The advertisement offered readers the opportunity to join an "East African Geological Safari" sponsored by the magazine's publisher, the American Museum

of Natural History. Travelers would visit areas of "geologic interest" in Kenya and Tanzania, including Olduvai Gorge, to study minerals, fossils, and wildlife.

The placement of the advertisement next to Sagan's article might have been a happy accident, but their subject matter is closely related. Any realistic account of the last ninety minutes on the cosmic calendar will feature Africa as a prominent setting. As far as our species is concerned, it was the only setting until a mere two minutes ago. It's as if our New Year's Eve party took place in a single boisterous pub before spilling into the town square at 11:58 pm for the countdown to midnight. Africa is where we learned how to be human. Unfortunately, the historical profession has been slow to appreciate this.



Big Historians might learn something from the story of how African history emerged and established itself as a legitimate academic field. African history, like Big History, challenged the arbitrary customs of a conservative discipline and persevered in the face of dismissals that it was not worth studying or simply nonexistent. Of particular relevance to Big History are two important ways in which historians of Africa responded to these challenges: by aggressively pursuing a wide array of non-documentary evidence and by asserting that history properly includes what we sometimes call “deep time.”

David Christian, in his 1991 article “The Case for Big History,” argued that preconceived notions should not put constraints on what kinds of evidence historians use. “If a question requires some knowledge of biology or geology,” he wrote, “then so be it.” Historians of Africa have adopted this attitude since at least 1948, when Roland Oliver was employed as the first lecturer in the subject at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. He and other pioneers took it for granted that with few documentary sources at hand, the questions they asked would require knowledge of oral tradition, archaeology, anthropology, and linguistics.

We should note that written records were not entirely absent before European colonization. Ethiopia has had a written language, Ge’ez, since the fifth century. Some early modern societies wrote in Arabic or in African languages such as Swahili or Hausa using Arabic script. But most African societies until recently were “extra-literate,” in the sense that they were outside the network of societies that used writing and typically kept historical memory in oral tradition, such as those handed down among the griots of West Africa. Samuel Johnson and Carl Reindorf, mission-educated Africans, first suggested in the 1890s that these traditions could serve as legitimate sources for academic history.

The Journal of African History has published research based on non-documentary sources since its debut in 1960. Early articles focused on archaeological, anthropological, and linguistic evidence, but this palette expanded quickly with the publication of methodological studies such as Jan Vansina’s *Oral Tradition* (1961). The JAH reached out to the natural sciences as well, publishing articles such as meteorologist Sharon Nicholson’s 1979 essay on “The Methodology of Historical Climate Reconstruction and Its Application to Africa.” Each of the non-documentary sources used by African historians has an accompanying trail of



Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. Photo by Noel Feans

critical essays on methodology. Big Historians, one hopes, will do this on an even larger scale.

When I started graduate school in African history at the University of Texas at Austin, in the late 1990s, one of my most beloved possessions was a battered copy of *Kenya's Past: An Introduction to Historical Method in Africa*, written by Thomas Spear. Published in 1981, and long out of print, the book lays out the basic tenets of the African historian. An illustration in the introduction portrays the sources for African history as a pyramid built of ethnography, oral tradition, linguistics, and archaeology. An updated version of this pyramid, reflecting more recent additions to the African historian's toolkit, would include epidemiology, botany, palynology, limnology, and genetics.

I later co-edited a book titled *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed*. It grouped research articles according to the kinds of evidence they emphasized; each section included introductory comments by distinguished scholars. I contributed a chapter asserting that in the case of early Maasai history, written sources are our best source of evidence. This was seen as going against the grain. In his introductory comments for the section that included my essay, Spear suggested that written documents be taken "more seriously." Such is the extent to which we have become accustomed to using non-documentary sources.

The fact that many historians don't consider this normal was impressed upon me when I became a professor and had non-Africanist colleagues observe my teaching. One observer devoted a paragraph in his evaluation letter to describing how I had drawn on linguistic and ecological evidence to describe the emergence of state structures in the Great Lakes region of East Africa. My colleague noted that some department members, during early discussions about hiring an Africanist, had raised questions about how African history would even work. His evaluation letter approved of my teaching but also took the opportunity to inform those colleagues, this is how it works.

Turning back to the dog-eared pages of *Kenya's Past*, we can find the other, equally significant, way in which African historians were intellectual forerunners of Big History: their assertion that history properly extends much farther into the past than most of their colleagues were ready to admit. "The history of eastern and central Kenya," Spear wrote in 1981, "stretches over more than two million years from the initial emergence of mankind itself to the present." My African history courses always include consideration of human evolution and early human history. For many students, it's the only time they will encounter these topics in college.

African historians anticipated Big History in recognizing that a deeper chronological



framework offers better perspective on historical questions and a better appreciation for the value of interdisciplinary research. This can be seen in the ongoing effort to understand the expansion of Bantu-speaking peoples from what is today Cameroon across central, eastern, and southern Africa, in a complex process lasting several millennia. African historians think that this process strongly shaped the continent's, and by extension the world's, later history. Their pursuit of the subject has led to collaborations with archaeologists, linguists, paleoecologists, and geneticists.

concluding wish: let's respect our deep heritage by abandoning the term prehistory once and for all. (I'm looking at you, ChronoZoom.) Daniel Lord Smail has shown that it is used, with prejudice and without empirical basis, "to illustrate what we are no longer." As an idea, prehistory fails to acknowledge the two tenets shared by African history and Big History: history is made of more than written sources, and our deep past is at the core of what we have been, still are, and will be. To embrace these tenets would surely be an expression of what Sagan meant by "the scientific wisdom and the sensitivity of mankind."

An even bigger challenge awaits the historians, whether of the African or Big variety, who attempt to come to grips with the recent series of dazzling discoveries about early human history at sites such as Blombos Cave in South Africa. The idea that modern human behavior emerged in a "revolutionary" burst of creativity about 40,000 years ago has been shredded by substantial evidence of symbolic thought and long-range planning in Africa, long before Homo sapiens migrated to other parts of the world, and most likely coterminous with our emergence as a species. Africa is where we learned to be human.

Allow me a



CALL FOR PAPERS
INTERNATIONAL BIG HISTORY ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE
AUGUST 6 - 10, 2014
DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SAN RAFAEL (SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA), CALIFORNIA

***TEACHING AND RESEARCHING BIG HISTORY:
BIG PICTURE, BIG QUESTIONS***

DEADLINE FOR [PAPER](#) / [PANEL](#) SUBMISSIONS IS FEBRUARY 10, 2014

The International Big History Association (IBHA) defines its purpose as “to promote, support and sponsor the diffusion and improvement of the academic and scholarly knowledge of the scientific field of endeavor commonly known as “Big History” by means of teaching and research and to engage in activities related thereto.”

Article 2 of the IBHA Articles of Incorporation.

The theme for the 2014 conference is “Teaching and Researching Big History: Big Picture, Big Questions.” The conference seeks to continue the dialog begun at the first IBHA conference in 2012. In addition IBHA seeks to create a forum for the articulation, discussion, and distillation of questions central to Big History. Among the topics that are to be addressed at the conference through a series of panels, roundtables, and discussions are:

- Big History and energy
- Big History in education
- Big History pedagogy
- Big History scholarship
- Big History research agenda
- Evolution of complexity
- Identification and analysis of thresholds
- Continuity and Contingency in our Universe
- Big History: interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, or trans-disciplinary?
- Big History and the future
- Big History and meaning
- Big History outcomes and assessment
- Politics and Big History
- Little Big Histories



Along with regular panels and roundtables, presentations might consist of:

- Question and answer sessions – where Big Historians will be able to answer questions and discuss research questions that are worth pursuing
- Brainstorming sessions – with very short, provocative papers
- General discussion panels – where different points of view about Big History can be addressed in 5 minute increments, specifically addressing the different cultural perceptions of Big History
- Workshops – where participants will view short film fragments and other art forms chosen by Big Historians, and presentations on Big History from the artistic point of view from artists, musicians, and storytellers
- Conference roundup – with a keynote address that summarizes the most important things outcomes of the conference

We encourage proposals on any topic related to Big History. A select group of papers will be included in a compilation of Big History Research that will be published after the 2014 conference.

The time limit for presenting papers will be 20 minutes, and the deadline for submitting papers to the session moderator is three weeks in advance of the conference. Individual paper proposals must include a 250 word abstract with the title of the paper, name, institutional affiliation, e-mail address, phone and fax numbers, and brief curriculum vitae, all integrated into a single file, preferably in MS-Word. Proposals for complete sessions or panels must contain the same information for each participant, as well as contact information and a brief C.V. for the moderator if you suggest one. (The program committee can help find moderators, if necessary.) Please submit your [paper](#) or [panel](#) proposal by clicking on one of these links, which allow for submission information. The deadline for paper and panel submissions is February 10, 2014.

All presenters at the conference must be members of IBHA. Presenters may become members at www.ibhanet.org and will need to do so prior to registration for the conference.

The IBHA Conference will convene on the campus of Dominican University of California in San Rafael, which is located twelve miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge. Attendees will have the option of selecting from one of several hotels in San Rafael and the surrounding area or staying in on-campus accommodation. San Rafael is a wonderful destination in Marin County surround by woods and beaches. For all things San Rafael go to <http://www.sanrafael.com>. For a complete guide to San Francisco and its many attractions, visit <http://www.sanfrancisco.com/>. And if you have more time to explore the larger Bay Area, see <http://www.visitcalifornia.com/Explore/Bay-Area/>.

Please find more details on the conference at www.ibhanet.org. We hope you can join us for this fantastic second IBHA conference!



Edgehill Mansion, Dominican University of California

*Program Committee: Mojgan Behmand, Cynthia Brown, Eric Chaisson,
William Grassie, Lowell Gustafson, Fred Spier, and Joseph Voros*

**Minutes
Virtual IBHA On-Line Board Meeting
October 10 - 22, 2013**

Agenda:

**Welcome to new Board member, Andrey Korotayev
Election of IBHA officers
New Board Members' Contact Person
New Business**

1. Fred Spier, Vice President of the IBHA, proposed to convene a virtual IBHA Board Meeting on October 8, 2013. He noted, "Andrey Korotayev, Barry Rodrigue, Lowell Gustafson and myself have been elected or reelected as Board members, each with a three year term. ·
112 (39.3%) out of 285 members voted in this ballot. This means that the required quorum (10 %) as stipulated in Article 2.11 of the IBHA Bylaws has been met.
· 1 voter abstained.
· Andrey Korotayev received 86 votes (77.5%)
· Barry Rodrigue received 95 votes (85.6%)
· Lowell Gustafson received 97 votes (87.4%)
· Fred Spier received 101 votes (91.0%)

Now that the Board members' election results have formally been announced, I would first of all like to congratulate Andrey Korotayev for being the newly elected Board member and welcome him to the IBHA Board. I very much hope and expect that he will feel comfortable, and eager to participate in our discussions aimed at furthering our mission statement: promoting the teaching and research of big history. According to Article 4.1 of our Bylaws, we now need to elect the officers. All officers need to be elected (or reelected) in a Board Meeting convened right after the Board members' elections. According to this interpretation, we therefore need to hold elections now for all the officer positions as part of the electronic Board Meeting that I am hereby convening." With approval of other IBHA Board members, the meeting was convened on October 10.

2. All current officers had expressed their willingness to serve again, while no other Board members had done so. Given this situation, Fred Spier suggested that the Board reelect by acclamation:
David Christian, as President
Fred Spier, as Vice President
Barry Rodrigue, as International Coordinator
Lowell Gustafson, as Secretary
Craig Benjamin, as Treasurer
On October 11, Fred Spier reported that only one Board member (Kathy Schick, mostly off email, doing fieldwork) had not voted and that all the current officers have been re-elected by email acclamation.

3. On October 15, a motion that had been moved by Craig Benjamin and seconded by Esther Quaedackers:
I move that we create the position of an IBHA New Board Members' Contact Person to whom potential new Board member candidates will be submitted by other Board members. This Contact Person will timely submit the entire list to the Board so that discussion can take place and agreement can be reached on new Board member candidates well before the annual elections.
was adopted with 9 votes in favor and only Kathy Schick's vote lacking.

4. On October 17, a motion that was moved by Craig Benjamin and seconded by Barry Rodrigue:
"That the Board of the IBHA appoint Board Vice President Fred Spier to the position of New Board Member's Contact Person," was adopted unanimously.

5. The board unanimously expresses their appreciation to Dr. Eric Chaisson for his service on the Board and requests that this be communicated to him.

6. The gavel sound could be heard and the meeting was adjourned on October 22, 2013.

Respectfully submitted,
Lowell Gustafson
Secretary, IBHA

Big History Series Starts on History Channel November 2

Check your local listings

BIG HISTORY

PREMIERES SAT., NOV. 2 AT
10/11P

f t #BigHistory

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VIDEOS



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What is Big History? (3 min) TV-PG

Big History is an exciting new way to look at our history and understand humans' place in the world that incorporates all of time from the Big Bang to the present day.

Big History Preview

Watch a sneak peek of the new H2 series, premiering Saturday, Nov. 2, at 10/11P

What is Big History?

Big History is an exciting new way to look at our history and understand humans' place in the world that incorporates all of time from the Big Bang to the present day.

Complexity

Find out how the concept of complexity plays into Big History and ultimately the beginning of life on Earth.

See the previews of the upcoming History Channel Series on Big History.

Upcoming WHA Conference

The World History Association will hold its 23rd annual conference at the Marriott San Jose hotel in Costa Rica, 15-18 July 2014. The Marriott San Jose is a beautiful colonial hacienda set in a 30-acre coffee plantation. The conference themes are 'Latin America in World History', and the 'Environment in World History'. Traditionally the field of Big History has always been well represented at WHA conferences, and we hope that this will continue to be the case in Costa Rica next July, particularly as one of the themes is focused on the environment. IBHA members interested in attending or presenting a paper on Big History should contact IBHA Treasurer Craig Benjamin at benjamic@gvsu.edu. Information about the conference can be found at the following web address: http://thewha.org/files/conference_2014/Costa-Rica-Flyer-R4.pdf

Moscow Conference on “Globalistics 2013” & “Big History and Global Evolution”

From Oct 23-25, three IBHA members (David Christian, Andrey Korotayev and Joe Voros) attended a superb conference on “Globalistics”, with a section on “Big History and Global Evolution”, hosted by the Faculty of Global Studies of Moscow State University [<http://fgp.msu.ru/about/about-the-faculty-of-global-studies/>]. We all gave presentations at the plenary session or other sections of the conference. David Christian also gave a lecture on Big History at the Kurchatov Institute (the institution that created the Soviet atomic weapons program). The conference ended with a banquet in the new headquarters of the Russian Academy of Sciences, from where we had magnificent night time views of Moscow and Moscow State University.

The Faculty of Global Studies is itself a fascinating and important departure, and its work is well aligned with that of the IBHA. It is extremely transdisciplinary in its approach, focusing on global processes of many different kinds, at very large scales, and also looking seriously at the near future. It builds on earlier Russian traditions of Universal history, and in particular on the work of scholars such as the great geo/chemist, Vladimir Vernadsky, who developed the idea of a ‘Noosphere’. It has developed a huge reputation within Russia; indeed, the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN) has now developed its own section on Global Processes (Globalistika).

Members of the IBHA who have any opportunity to do so should consider collaborating with the Faculty of Global Studies, or with the Global Studies Consortium [<http://globalstudiesconsortium.org/>], an international association linking several programs in global studies.

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