

AFRICA: GLOBAL PERCEPTION, HUMANITY’S CONNECTION



ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Why do our human origins matter in today’s world?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Explain the impact of past and present biases related to Africa.
- Identify evidence of the origins of humanity and the nature of human evolution.
- Describe the contradictions between historical racial categories and science.
- Discuss the significance of Africa as the geographical source of humankind.



LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



TIME NEEDED

65 minutes



MATERIALS

- *Africa or Not?* slideshow (PDF document under “Amistad” at www.njsbf.org) or handout (one per pair or small group)
- *Africa or Not? Image Descriptions* (one copy for teacher reference)
- Copies of or access to the article, “Why is Africa Called the Dark Continent?”: <https://www.sporcle.com/blog/2018/04/why-is-africa-called-the-dark-continent>.
- AV equipment to show a video



VOCABULARY

characteristic	evolve	<i>Homo erectus</i>	Neanderthal
Dark Continent	exploitative	imperialist	savagery
emergence	fossil	missionary	scientific racism


Procedures

1

PART I

Personal Perceptions of Africa (15 minutes)

- 1** Ask students: “What words or pictures come to mind when you think of Africa?” Allow students to share, but don’t comment on their associations. List their thoughts on the board.
- 2** Tell students you will show them a series of photos and they will need to decide which ones are set in Africa and which ones are not. Show students the *Africa or Not?* slideshow, moving through each image quickly and with no discussion. As they view the photos, students should note which images they think are set in Africa. Alternatively, provide pairs or small groups with copies of the *Africa or Not?* handout and have them circle images they think are set in Africa.
- 3** Ask students to share how many of the photos they think are set in Africa. Allow them to share their rationales for specific images. Reveal that only two (#6 and #11) are not set in Africa and are, in fact, set in the United States (see the *Africa or Not? Image Descriptions* for background on all photos). Debrief using some of the following questions:
 - Were you surprised by the results? Why?
 - What perceptions or assumptions about Africa do you think influenced your decisions? Where do you think they come from?
 - How do you think these perceptions affect people in Africa? How do they affect people in our own country?
 - What do you think we can all do to be more aware of our biases and to rid ourselves of them?

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- 4** Conclude this exercise by sharing the following with students: “Many people associate Africa with poverty, war, a lack of development, wilderness and small village life. As you can see, though, Africa is a diverse continent of more than 50 countries, with all types of people and places—big cities, small villages, poverty, wealth, happiness and struggle. While Africa has more than its fair share of poverty (due, in part, to centuries of colonization), it’s important to remember that there’s much more to Africa than just hardship. And we must also remember that problems like poverty exist in our own backyard. Whether we’re talking about the U.S. or distant places like Africa, it’s important to avoid stereotypes—oversimplified ideas or prejudices—about the people who live there.”

PART II

Historical Perceptions of Africa (30 minutes)

- 5** Comment to students that our current perceptions of Africa are rooted in enduring historical prejudices. Tell them that they will read an article that illustrates this idea. Provide students with copies of or access to “Why is Africa Called the Dark Continent?”: <https://www.sporcle.com/blog/2018/04/why-is-africa-called-the-dark-continent>.
- 6** Highlight that the article discusses a controversy involving a newscaster who used the term “dark continent” in reference to a presidential trip to Africa. Tell students that, in pairs, they will read the article and write a comment they might have posted online in response to the original controversy. Post the following guidelines:
- The comment should be about a paragraph in length and written professionally (no insulting language).
 - It should discuss the problematic history and nature of the term “dark continent,” using at least three pieces of evidence from the article.
 - It should conclude with a suggested resolution to the controversy.
 - Annotate the article as you read by highlighting sections and making notes in the margins to help you identify evidence needed to support your point of view.

7 When students finish writing, have two pairs join together to exchange comments and share feedback about each other's arguments. Conclude with a class discussion using some of the following questions:

- Why do you think the stereotype of Africa as “dark” (as in savage or untamed) has persisted despite, as the author notes, its great natural beauty and historic empires?
- How was the notion of a “dark continent” used to justify exploitative practices, such as colonization and slavery? How was such exploitation blamed on Africans themselves?
- How do you think the idea of a “dark continent” continues to influence people's attitudes about Africa and Black people in the modern world?
- Though not a reference to skin color, how is the term “dark continent” connected to racism?
- How would you respond to someone you know who used the term “dark continent” today?

PART III

Humans—Evolving in Africa (20 minutes)

8 Explain to students that the notion of a “dark continent” and other stereotypes about Africa reflected the rise of scientific racism, the false belief that the “races” belong to separate lineages, and that some are inherently superior or inferior to others.

9 Provide students with the *Discovering Human Origins in Africa* handout and review the questions with them.¹ Tell them they will take notes on each question as they watch a video. Highlight that they will also record a quote from the video that they think reflects the central idea of this lesson (see SAMPLE QUOTES below).

SAMPLE QUOTES

“No one really had a sense that anything interesting occurred in Africa.”

“This tied in nicely with racist and imperialist thoughts of the day.”

¹ Questions are from “Discovering Human Origins in Africa Support Materials.” PBS Learning Media. Accessed March 21, 2020. <https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/nvdh-sci-human-origins/discovering-human-origins-in-africa/support-materials>.

“Up to that point, everyone said let’s look to Europe for our ancestor.”

“It was unthinkable that anything as important as the evolution of humans could have happened in Africa.”

NOTE

See Additional Resources for videos that delve more deeply into the scientific evidence for the origins of humanity in Africa.

10 Show the video “Discovering Human Origins in Africa” [4:07], which explores how racial biases influenced scientists studying the origins of the human species (use the “download” feature to play the video offline if desired): <https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/nvdh-sci-huma-norigins/discovering-human-origins-in-africa>. Pause the video as needed to allow students to capture notes, or play the video twice.

11 After viewing the video, have students share and discuss their quotes in small groups using these guiding questions:

- How does the quote you selected reflect our discussions about anti-Africa bias?
- How did this bias influence scientists of that time? Why does it matter today?

12 Conclude the lesson by discussing, as a class, some of the questions on the *Discovering Human Origins in Africa* handout and the discussion questions provided on the next page. Emphasize the importance of understanding that all of humanity emerged in Africa as a way to dispel racial myths and stereotypes.

Discussion Questions

1

Where do historical stereotypes about Africa and African people come from? In what ways have they persisted into the 21st century?

2

What is the impact of these stereotypes on Black people? What is the impact on the broader society?

3

How has cultural bias and racism influenced scientific research in the past?

4

How does current evolutionary scientific evidence help debunk stereotypes that exist about Black people?

5

Why is it important to know that humankind emerged in Africa? How can this knowledge be used to challenge prejudice?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + BioInteractive, “Great Transitions: The Origins of Humans,” video, <https://www.biointeractive.org/classroom-resources/great-transitions-origin-humans>.
- + California Academy of Science, “Walking with Lucy,” video, <https://www.calacademy.org/educators/walking-with-lucy>.
- + PBS Learning Media, “Becoming Human/Fossil Evidence of Bipedalism,” video, <https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/novat10.sci.life.evo.lucy/fossil-evidence-of-bipedalism>.
- + PBS Learning Media, “Finding Lucy,” video, <https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/tdc02.sci.life.evo.findinglucy/finding-lucy>.
- + PBS Learning Media, “Laetoli Footprints,” video, <https://ny.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/tdc02.sci.life.evo.laetolifoot/laetoli-footprints>.