

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>.

Africa or Not?



Circle the images below that you think are set in Africa.





Africa or Not? Image Descriptions



1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10



11



12

- 1 Women with water near Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, June 17, 2017 (Photographer RM / Shutterstock.com)
- 2 Aerial photo of Lagos Island, Nigeria, September 11, 2018 (Tayvay / Shutterstock.com)
- 3 Girl drinking fresh water from tap in Bamako, Mali (Riccardo Mayer / Shutterstock.com)
- 4 View of the Red Sea from a hotel window in Egypt (Zhukov Oleg / Shutterstock.com)
- 5 Main hall of the Giza Museum in Cairo, Egypt, May 4, 2019 (Gabriela Beres / Shutterstock.com)
- 6 Brothers and sisters on their front porch in the U.S. (Joseph Sohm / Shutterstock.com)
- 7 School children at high school graduation in Accra, Ghana, July 27, 2013 (Nataly Reinch / Shutterstock.com)
- 8 Doctor looking through operating microscope in Cape Town, South Africa (Mark Fisher / Shutterstock.com)
- 9 Market street with people in Zanzibar, Tanzania, July 16, 2016 (Tatyana Vyc / Shutterstock.com)
- 10 Rugby game in Johannesburg, South Africa, August 21, 2010 (Luke Schmidt / Shutterstock.com)
- 11 Two boys playing with a skateboard in Los Angeles, CA (Joseph Sohm / Shutterstock.com)
- 12 People on the street in Kampala, Uganda (Pecold / Shutterstock.com)



Discovering Human Origins in Africa

NAME: _____

*As you watch the video, take notes in the spaces below to help you answer the questions.¹
At the bottom of this handout, capture a quote from the video that represents the lesson's central idea.*

- 1 Why didn't many scientists in the early 20th century believe that human origins began in Africa?
- 2 What evidence did Darwin and Huxley provide to support their belief that human origins were in Africa?
- 3 Why was Raymond Dart's finding of the Taung child so controversial? What was the implication of the finding?

QUOTE FROM THE VIDEO THAT REFLECTS THE LESSON'S CENTRAL IDEA:

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSING YOUR QUOTE:

- 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?

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-humanorigins/discovering-human-origins-in-africa/support-materials>.

What is a social construct and how is it connected to race?

In the late 18th century, German anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach created five categories to group human beings based on physical appearance and the geographic origin of their ancestors.¹ The establishment of different “races”—using physical identifiers such as skin color, hair texture and eye shape—altered human history in far-reaching ways. Social hierarchies and emerging pseudoscientific theories based on race have been used to justify exploration, colonization, forced removal, slavery and genocide.

In his celebrated *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), Thomas Jefferson wrote: “The first difference which strikes us is that of colour.” He argued that Black people were inferior to both white people and Native Americans.² The false notion of white supremacy helped the nascent United States resolve the contradictions inherent in enslaving Africans and African Americans while proclaiming the ideals of liberty and equality. Deeply rooted beliefs about white superiority and Black inferiority fueled centuries of slavery, lynching and Jim Crow segregation. Current problems—such as neo-Nazi gatherings like the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA, and the aggressive policing that led to the unnecessary death of George Floyd in 2020—show that race remains a salient and often lethal way of sorting human beings.

Though we live in a racialized society, there is actually no scientific basis for race. As noted in the documentary *Race—The Power of an Illusion*, “There are no characteristics, no traits, not even one gene that distinguish all members of one so-called race from all members of another race.”³ The program highlights that most human variation occurs within and not between “races,” so two random Koreans are likely to be as genetically different as a Korean and an Italian. Moreover, most traits are inherited independently of one another, and “the genes for skin color have nothing to do with genes for hair texture, eye shape, blood type, musical talent or athletic ability.”⁴

Race is a social construct. It tells us nothing about a person’s ability or character, yet it is often the first thing we notice about others, especially people of color. Race is not real, but racism is very much a reality. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley reminds us that “racism is not about how you look, it is about how people assign meaning to how you look.”⁵ The meaning of race has been created and sustained not by science, but by historical, social, economic and political practices that have created unequal access to opportunities and resources. Race remains significant because of widespread and shared social perceptions that it has value and meaning. Understanding that race is a social construct provides a critical lens through which we can better understand how racism operates and how to act to dismantle it.

1 Raj Bhopal, “The beautiful skull and Blumenbach’s errors: the birth of the scientific concept of race” *BMJ* 335, no. 7633 (2007): 1308, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2151154>.

2 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Richmond: 1853), pages 149-152, 155.

3 California Newsreel, “Race Literacy Quiz,” <http://newsreel.org/guides/race/quiz.htm>.

4 PBS, “What is Race? / Is Race for Real?,” https://www.pbs.org/race/001_WhatsRace/001_00-home.htm.

5 American Anthropological Association and Science Museum of Minnesota, “Race—Are We So Different?,” <https://understandingrace.org/lived-experience/>.