

# Bringing African Voices into the Undergraduate African Politics Classroom

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## ABSTRACT

Many African politics courses rely heavily on readings authored by North American and European scholars. Scholarly and primary sources written or created by Africans are often underrepresented, and a similar problem persists across regionally focused politics courses. Yet a diversity of sources and perspectives are essential to providing students with a well-rounded understanding of African politics. This article offers a brief argument for the pedagogical benefits of increasing the number of African-authored materials in African politics courses and provides a list of suggested resources for instructors eager to diversify their own courses.

Teaching African politics, or indeed any regional politics course, is an exercise in winnowing. It is difficult to cover such breadth of region—and its accompanying diversity—in a semester. To make things even more challenging, those of us working at small universities or liberal arts colleges often find ourselves teaching outside of our areas of regional expertise. To manage, we focus on key themes and draw on specific country cases for illustrations. Yet, unfortunately, in an effort to distill, organize, and create accessibility, richness can be lost. Even more troubling, in an effort to cover the major theoretical works on African politics (many of which are authored by North American or European scholars), scholarly and primary works by African authors can get crowded out. While the typical African politics syllabus contains works by some African authors, including the obligatory Chinua Achebe novel, in most cases the majority of the readings we assign our students were authored by either North Americans or scholars based in the former colonial powers. We are eager to include classic political science texts on colonialism, nationalism, and party politics in our courses, yet due to the very processes we study—such as colonial discrimination and limited educational opportunities—these texts have not come to us from African authors, but were written by Europeans and North Americans whose work represents centuries of privilege.

I am not suggesting that only Africans should study and write about African politics, or that writings by non-African Africanists are inherently inferior; however, when teaching an undergraduate African politics course, which will be the only academic exposure to Africa many of our students receive, it is essential that we are purposeful about presenting students with a broad range

of perspectives from the region. African voices, frequently referenced and representing multiple classes, genders, and ethnicities, are essential for telling the story of African politics. Many of our students enter our classes with problematic impressions of Africa, fueled by a media that highlights conflict and poverty rather than cooperation and growth. The surest way to undermine their “single story”<sup>1</sup> narrative is by introducing them to a range of diverse and interesting African perspectives.

Yet finding and integrating these sources, especially for faculty who were not trained in African studies, can be a challenge. Thus, this article is offered as a resource for other teachers, both at the secondary and postsecondary levels, who would also like to increase the representation of African voices in their curriculum. The first part of the article offers a brief argument for the pedagogical benefits of bringing in more voices. While most readers will recognize the value in diversifying their courses, just as with any effort to adapt curriculum, this can be a challenging and time-consuming project. It can also be a painful exercise as we recognize inherent biases in our syllabuses—no matter our country of origin—and work to balance them with a more comprehensive representation of African politics. In order to facilitate this process, the second part of this article contains an annotated list of African-authored works or primary sources that depict African, rather than Western, perspectives including suggestions for how to use each source in class. The pedagogical suggestions are drawn from my own experiences teaching African politics at a small liberal arts college and from insights gained from a series of reading groups I conducted with undergraduate students at my home institution.

## THE PEDAGOGICAL BENEFITS: INTRODUCING COMPLEXITY AND INVITING PARTICIPATION

Exposing students to more African authors and primary sources has a range of pedagogical benefits; in this section I relate

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three of the most rewarding that I have found as a result of my diversifying my curriculum. First, and perhaps most important, these sources quickly and effectively expose students to the complexities of African politics. Writers such as Mahmood Mamdani and Binyavanga Wainaina consistently challenge the standard reporting on African politics, shaking students out of their assumptions and introducing them to the rich complexity of real-life political events. Students who read Jomo Kenyatta's or Julius Nyerere's accounts of the independence era will gain a firsthand look at the range of actors involved—as well as their corresponding (and sometimes contradictory) demands, priorities, and allegiances—at the birth of a modern state. These “insiders’ perspectives” can also serve as effective preparatory materials for in-class activities such as debates or simulations that allow students to further explore African political histories.

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The second pedagogical benefit to using these sources is that they can encourage students to connect emotionally with the material. Novels humanize politics<sup>2</sup> and can dovetail neatly with academic literature. Having an emotional connection to the subject ensures students will engage with the material more deeply, and psychological research suggests they are more likely to remember the information as well (Sharot, Verfaellie, and Yonelinas 2007). Highly personal writing, such as that in memoirs or poetry, is especially effective at creating these emotional responses. When I talk with graduates who took my African politics course years ago, the novels and poetry we read are what they remember most vividly.

Finally, using popular, African-authored sources in class helps students feel more comfortable participating in class discussion, especially if they already feel intimidated by the prospect of studying a region about which they know very little. Primary sources and novels can be especially useful in overcoming this barrier because they often surprise students and encourage them to engage with the material. For example, when I teach about the African independence era of the 1960s, I show students a brief film clip of Kwame Nkrumah's inauguration speech, complete with fireworks, and assign an excerpt from Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* (Kenyatta 1938). They are captivated by the excitement in the film clip and are better able to understand the enthusiasm and hope of independence; yet this is tempered by the Kenyatta piece which hints at the role ethnicity will play in the distribution of the spoils of independence. These firsthand accounts, more than any textbook or lecture, are able to link students to the personalities and emotions of a time, resulting in a more engaging and effective learning experience.

#### LIST OF RECOMMENDED SOURCES

This list covers a wide range of sources, many of which I have used in my own classroom with good results. I chose them to introduce

students to complexity, to evoke an emotional response, and for their brevity and ease of use in already content-heavy courses. I have included a brief description of each to help instructors identify sources that will work well in their own courses.

#### Fiction

***An African Quilt: 24 Modern African Stories* (Solomon and Rampone Jr. 2013), 371 pages; Themes: poverty, authoritarianism, gender, rural and urban life, peace and conflict**

The Introduction to this collection begins by telling the reader that “there are many Africas” and these short stories are an excellent way to introduce your students to them (xi). The stories relay the experiences of contemporary characters as they encounter everyday challenges and opportunities. The themes covered are so wide-ranging, and the stories themselves so short, that this could easily be assigned as a required text for reference throughout the semester.

***Houseboy* (Oyono 1966), 122 pages; Themes: French colonialism, identity politics, Christian missionaries**

In this very short novel, the story is told through the main character, Toundi's, journal entries and explores West African politics through Toundi's own identity crisis. He tells of his experiences as a young boy working as a servant to a French Commandant in French West Africa and introduces readers to the role of the Catholic church in colonization, the harshness of colonial rule, and the dark stories of the colonists themselves.

***The Magic of Saida* (Vassanji 2012), 322 pages; Themes: poverty and wealth, gender, role of middle class, religion, identity politics, Asian-African experience, immigration to the West**

The story follows Kamal, a young man who was born to a Black Swahili mother by an Indian father in coastal Tanzania, and his struggles with his ethnic, religious, and class identity. After overcoming poverty to become a successful physician in Canada, Kamal returns to Tanzania as a middle-aged man, wracked with guilt over a complex and ruined relationship with his first—and only—love, Saida. Students are immediately drawn to the compelling characters; indeed, I have never taught a novel with which students were more thoroughly engaged. Kamal's layered identity and the communities he encounters throughout the story are excellent gateways for discussions about the role of ethnicity, class, and the often remarkably different experiences of men and women in contemporary East Africa. Kamal's treatment of Saida can also be read as a metaphor for colonialism's effects on Tanzania. At over 300 pages this book is best used in an upper-division course or as part of a study abroad curriculum.

***Things Fall Apart* (Achebe 1958), 209 pages; Themes: British colonialism, African Traditional Religion, Christian missionaries, gender, traditional and Western education, village life**

*Things Fall Apart* hardly needs an introduction, as it is one of the most recognized African novels ever written. Yet, it is widely

adopted in African politics courses for a reason: it provides one of the most succinct and direct depictions of the coming of colonialism and the dramatic transition rural African communities were forced to undergo. Achebe's famous novel chronicles the life of Okonkwo, a yam farmer in a small West African village, as his society transforms dramatically in the wake of early colonial encounters. In the classroom the novel does two things very well: first, it teaches students about the complexity of precolonial African societies and their highly organized governance systems;

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and, second, it shows the immediate effects of colonialism, preparing students to think about its long-term implications. I find that reading *Things Fall Apart* alongside Peter Ekeh's work on "the two publics" (1975) helps students better understand the centrality of family ties to precolonial African societies, thus helping them better understand Ekeh's argument for why post-colonial African states receive a weaker allegiance than does the "primordial public."

**Zenzele: A Letter for my Daughter (Maraire 1997), 194 pages; Themes: independence, religious identity, rural and urban life**

This beautifully written and accessible novel narrates Zimbabwe's political history through a series of letters written from a contemporary woman to her college-age daughter. It explores the contrasts between rural and urban Zimbabwean life, juxtaposing the traditional with the modern and the struggle to reconcile the two. It is especially useful in survey or lower-division courses.

### Films and Television

**Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire, <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk>**

This catalogue of British colonial films includes approximately 150 films, ranging in type from newsreels to documentaries to advertisements. The catalogue includes films on nearly every British holding from throughout the colonial period, ending with independence celebrations in several African countries. These films can be used to illustrate African societies at the beginning of colonialism, the dramatic effects of colonial incursion, and, perhaps most centrally, the paternalistic attitudes of the British toward African populations. The Industrial Films section includes gems such as *Beer at its Best* (1955) and *Cocoa from the Gold Coast* (1936) which reveal the origins of, and processes behind, some of the continent's most important industries. The catalogue is easily searchable by country or topic.

### Local News and Films

Many African countries' media outlets have YouTube channels. For example, Kenya's CitizenTV (<https://www.youtube.com/user/kenyacitizen>) provides recent news and human interest stories which can helpfully illustrate political issues or serve as data for students to analyze. Local film industries, some of which produce hundreds of films each year, are also a useful resource.<sup>3</sup>

Nigeria's "Nollywood" is the largest of these, producing dramas and action films in rapid succession, many of which are available on YouTube with more added daily. While production values are usually low, students can learn a great deal about social and political life through these movies. Films can also provide a rich dataset for analysis as students can study the messages and recurring themes in this programming. For example, one of my senior students wrote a paper analyzing the portrayal of religion in popular Nollywood films. Local television commercials—advertising

everything from bar soap to mobile phone services—can also be used to prompt discussions about the economy or the role of the middle class in African societies.

### Maps

**General Maps from the Digital Collections of the Library of Congress**

The Library of Congress's General Maps collection includes an extensive selection of maps of the African continent. A simple search for "Africa" produces nearly 30,000 maps covering approximately 500 years of history. The maps are searchable by century, country, or region. In addition to driving home the size of the continent, topographical or crop maps can help students think about the development of ethnic groups or the implications of climate change for commerce and agriculture.

### Nonfiction

**African Women Writing Resistance: An Anthology of Contemporary Voices (Hernandez et al., eds. 2010), 360 pages**

This volume considers women's participation in resistance, broadly defined. It contains short stories, poetry, and excerpts from longer works of fiction and nonfiction. It is well-organized by theme and covers issues such as environmental degradation, war, and ethnically driven conflict.

**One Day I Will Write About This Place: A Memoir (Wainaina 2011), 272 pages**

This masterfully written memoir begins with Wainaina's middle-class upbringing in Kenya. It reveals the complexities of ethnicity and Kenyan politics from the 1970s through the 1990s. Reading this book alongside Wainaina's satirical essay, "How to Write about Africa" (2005), is a helpful exercise as it allows students to grasp the range and depth of African politics and encourages them to challenge the singular narrative they typically hear.

**The Africa Reader: Colonial Africa and The Africa Reader: Independent Africa (Cartey and Kilson, eds. 1970)**

These volumes are unfortunately out of print, yet are readily available through online booksellers. The second is especially useful as it includes excerpts from the writings of Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah, Patrice Lumumba, Jomo Kenyatta,

Oginga Odinga, and many other independence advocates and early leaders. Their writings and speeches capture an important era in their countries' histories as they track the development of emerging national identities and illustrate the hope and challenges of the early independence era. Entries are short.

***We Should All Be Feminists* (Adichie 2015), 64 pages**

This short, accessible book is based on Adichie's 2009 TED Talk by the same name. It provides a succinct, thoughtful, and practical argument for feminism, drawing in large part on Adichie's own experiences in Nigeria and her role as a well-known African author. It is an excellent choice for a unit on gender and would also be useful in a course on women in African politics.

***Women Writing Africa Series, Vols. I–IV* (The Feminist Press 2003–2008)**

This literature-heavy series includes an edited volume on each of four African regions: Southern, West Africa and the Sahel, Eastern, and Northern. The volumes contain a range of sources

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including essays, poems, editorials, and interviews, all authored by African women on important social and political issues. Most pieces are short, allowing faculty to assign them alongside the day's scholarly article or chapter readings.

**Poetry**

Poetry is rarely used in the political science classroom, yet it is a highly effective teaching tool. Poems provide just a taste of an issue or idea, and in so doing they spark interest and cultivate emotional investment in the topic. Assigning one or two poems at the beginning of a new section or course topic can pique student interest and increase buy-in. Also, because most poems are short, one can be assured that virtually all of the students will have read them in advance of the class meeting.

***Stray Truths* (Kezilahabi with Drury 2015), 123 pages**

This is the first collection of Swahili poet Euphrase Kezilahabi's poems that have been translated into English. The free verse poems are about everyday life. Reading about the mundane helps students to identify the similarities between their own culture and those revealed in Kezilahabi's beautiful poetry. The poem "Sorting the Rice" (18–19) hints at the disappointment over Ujamaa's failed promises in Tanzania, while "Fishing at Lake Victoria" (4–5) points to the sinister implications of neocolonialism. Poems are printed in Swahili alongside their corresponding English translation.

**Twitter**

With the proliferation of social media platforms, students have unprecedented access to a stream of political content direct from activists, student leaders, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and even heads of state. Paul Kagame is known for his

frequent tweeting (@PaulKagame), covering everything from Rwanda's gorilla tourism to his own birthday. An assignment requiring students to follow Uhuru Kenyatta (@UKenyatta) or Jacob Zuma (@SAPresident) will provide a fast introduction to the current political issues in Kenya or South Africa, respectively. Trending hashtags, such as #FeesMustFall or #WhatWouldMagufuliDo, offer a wealth of data students can analyze for research projects.

**CONCLUSION**

With the increasing commitment on university campuses to creating "global citizens" and promoting diversity in all corners of the college experience, it is essential that our curriculum lead the way by reflecting a range of perspectives and voices. Exposing students to a variety of sources is especially important when teaching about Africa, a continent about which students typically know very little. The reading list should be as diverse and varied as the concepts being taught. As you seek to introduce students to African politics from a range of perspectives, I hope that the sources listed here will prove useful and

lend inspiration to your course assignments. In using a diversity of voices in the classroom we can expect students to more fully engage with the material and develop more nuanced understandings of the complex world of African politics. ■

**NOTES**

1. Watching and discussing Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," is an excellent way to do this.
2. See Timothy Longman's (2013) argument for this, and his broader analysis of the value of novels in the classroom.
3. For excellent overviews of using African films in the classroom see both "African Films in the Classroom" (Gugler 2010) and "Symposium: Teaching about Africa through Film and Media" (2014).

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