

African History Prelim Examination

April, 2006

Instructions: Please answer four questions, one from each section below. In sections I-III be sure to demonstrate your familiarity with the themes and literatures in three separate regions of the African continent. In addition, be sure each essay has a clear line of argument, addresses as many dimensions of the question as possible, and offers relevant, persuasive evidence from specific secondary sources wherever appropriate. Best of luck!

Section I: Pre-1850

- 1) The study of the pre-history of the Africa continent has drawn on a number of distinct methodologies—archaeology, linguistics, oral tradition principal among them. How successful do you think scholars have been in integrating the findings of these different approaches? What are some of the inherent limitations? Please provide specific examples.
- 2) Over the past thirty years, the study of slavery and the slave trade in Africa has undergone profound changes as historians have developed new approaches, new theories, new tools and paradigms for understanding Africa's precolonial past. Discuss the major issues and long term trends in this scholarship.
- 3) Islam is a well-developed theme in African historiography. However, scholarship appears to be divided between advocates of a position that interprets Islam primarily in religious terms internal to the Islamic tradition itself, and one which interprets Islam primarily in terms of its social and political impact. Do you think this dichotomy is real? Is it justified? What interpretive tools do you find most useful in approaching the history of Islam?
- 4) The study of Islam and of Islamic revolutions and reform movements has been absolutely central to the development of African historiography for North, East and West Africa. What have been the primary concerns of this literature over the past four decades? What shifts have occurred both in argument and in thematic concern? What new directions of investigation do you see emerging in recent years?

Section II: Post-1850

- 5) One of the most difficult problems confronted by African historians is how to depict African historical agency without making colonialism appear, in some sense, less vicious, less violent or less exploitative. The dimensions of this challenge have changed over the past thirty years as scholars have continued to develop new approaches and new tools for understanding the lived experience of

