

The Scramble for Africa: An Exercise in Literacy and History

by Laura Dull

Middle and secondary social studies teachers can integrate support for student with lessons that promote historical thinking. In this lesson, students examine an account of the 19th century European colonial “Scramble for Africa” from an American history textbook for middle school students and another from a Ghanaian social studies textbook for upper elementary school students. By looking at two accounts of the same event, students also practice “historical thinking” by identifying biases in sources, weighing the validity of accounts, and producing their own historical narratives (Holt, 1990).

Students in the United States do not generally learn about European colonialism in Africa until middle or high school, so the texts are aimed at different grade levels. However, in analyzing the two texts, students are asked to consider the audience; this comparison can help them understand the differences in narrative styles.

This lesson can be used during units on African colonization or it could be used to introduce students to the kind of reading and analysis that they will be expected to undertake during their social studies course. In addition, the strategy can be applied to any activity in which students are asked to compare two accounts of the same event. It can be adapted for middle and high school social studies courses or used with pre-service teachers.

When I was in Ghana, I was struck by the narrative style of their (much smaller) textbooks. In the primary textbooks, Ghanaian authors presented their history as a dialogue between elders and children or children and their teachers. In texts for older children, the dialogues were gone, but the books retained an engaging story-telling style. In contrast, most American textbooks, even those for elementary students, rely on an expository style and adopt a seemingly neutral tone that deprives the text of conflict and perspective (Loewen, 1995). These texts are more focused on providing facts, dates, names, technological advances, and vocabulary.

After competing with other Europeans over African trade for centuries, Europeans became interested in claiming exclusive rights to certain lands. They met in Berlin in 1884-1885 for a series of meetings at which no Africans were present. They agreed that Europeans who had evidence of settlements in interior regions could colonize that area. This resulted in the “scramble” by Europeans to conquer or sign treaties with Africans to assert European dominance in different regions.

The first account is from a textbook produced by the Ghanaian Ministry of Education (Tamakloe, E.K., et al. *Ghana Social Studies Series, Pupil’s Book 4*. Accra: Ghana Education Service, 1988, p. 88).

At first only the Portuguese traded with the Africans. But later, traders from other European countries joined them. The Europeans soon began to fight one another because each wanted to have the trade all to himself. In order to stop these fights, a big meeting was called in Europe. . . [Later] another meeting was called in Europe. It was again decided . . . that only one European country should be allowed to trade in an area. But that country must not only show that it had been trading with the Africans on the coast. It must also show that it had been trading with the Africans living inland . . . As a result of these meetings, men from European countries rushed off to Africa as quickly as they could and started making agreements with the chiefs inland. They brought tobacco, drinks, clothes, gunpowder and guns to the chiefs so that the chiefs would quickly sign the *agreements* and *treaties* they brought. In the agreements, the Europeans said that their own country was very powerful. They said that their king could help the African chiefs in times of war. . . The white man used the gifts and sweet words to deceive the African chiefs and get them to sign the treaties to be friendly and to allow the white man to trade.

The second account is from a World History textbook for secondary students in the United States (Farah, M. A. and Karls, A. B. *World History: The Human Experience, The Modern Era*. Columbus, OH: Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, 2001).

In the 1500s and 1600s Europeans traded along the coasts of Africa. From West African trading posts, they carried out the transatlantic slave trade . . . West African states traded salt, gold, and iron wares with the Europeans, but some local rulers also supplied prisoners of war to the slave trade . . . To control this trade and to expand their coastal holdings, European nations began to push inland in the 1870s. Before this time, Europeans had avoided

inland Africa because of the difficult terrain and deadly diseases, such as malaria. In the late 1800s, the discovery of the natural ingredient, quinine, to fight malaria and the use of steamships for river transportation made European exploration of inland Africa easier. By 1900, European powers, especially Great Britain and France, had acquired vast new territories in West Africa.

The two accounts clearly illustrate the difference between narrative and expository texts. The Ghanaian account seeks to tell a story, complete with good and bad characters, while the American text is concerned with chronology, geography, and facts. The Ghanaian text tells a story that enables the reader to envision the encounters between Europeans and Africans. In the second text, there is no direct reference to Africans as players during the scramble.

Through comparison of these two texts, students can also recognize the authors' biases. The American text uses passive constructions or verbs to mask the greedy intentions, and actions by Europeans that are sometimes violent. Europeans are portrayed as simply "exploring" these regions and then suddenly managed to "acquire vast new regions." The Ghanaian version shows Africans solely as victims of White people. They avoid mention of slavery (this is also true of the rest of the book) and imply that alliances that Africans made with Europeans were coerced or made under fraudulent pretexts. While this was true in many cases, there were also Africans who were not duped and willingly united with Europeans.

To initiate this lesson, I told students to read each of the accounts, without telling them where the sources came from or who wrote them. I simply asked them to think about which source was more accurate or convincing while they read. After they read each story, I asked them a series of questions to lead them through summary, classification, comparison, and analysis. After discussing the similarities, differences, and perspectives of the accounts, the students were asked to write the story in their own words using information from each source. They needed to explain who their audience was and demonstrate how their text addressed that audience. Teachers can also include primary source documents to help the students construct their stories (Harlow, 2003; Fetter, 1979; see also, <http://www.emints.org/ethemes/resources/S00001799.shtml>).

The differences in these accounts starkly illustrate the danger of giving students only one account of a historical event. In this case, without the Ghanaian story to frame information and create an image of an event, students learn only somewhat random and disconnected facts about the scramble from the textbook. On the other hand, the American textbook provides information about technological and medical inventions that provide additional reasons why Europeans were able to colonize the continent. To improve student literacy and historical thinking, good social studies teachers will therefore supplement textbooks with primary sources, literary accounts, poems, images, and other media. As in this lesson, they can also bring in textbook accounts from other nations for comparison of how each nation tells its histories (Lindaman and Ward, 2006).

References

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