

Anthony Comegna ([00:20](#)):

Happy, happy, happy, happy, happy, happy, new year to all of you out there joining us. And even those who aren't, happy new year to you too. This week on the show, we have a very impressive piece of graduate student research to highlight. Years ago when I was at the Cato Institute, I put out a call for articles on H-Net, which is a listserv for historians. I was asking for more content contributors at [libertarianism.org](#). And almost immediately, I was contacted by our guests today, Ibrahim Anoba, with an idea for a series on commercial freedom in African history. And I am, as some of you may know, a big advocate for classical liberals producing much more world history, and non-Western history in general. So, I was thrilled with Ibrahim's conception of this sort of a series. And over the years, we worked together to publish that series. Of course, he did all the research and the writing, all the real work, and I simply just helped edit and publish them on [libertarianism.org](#).

Anthony Comegna ([01:23](#)):

But since then, he's expanded all of that work into a bigger, a much, much deeper book project. And before I say too much and spoil some of the bigger surprises here, we'll go ahead and jump straight into it with the first part of my interview with graduate student and historian, Ibrahim Anoba.

Anthony Comegna ([01:41](#)):

All right, so Ibrahim, to start us off here, I'd just like you to introduce the project a bit for us. You could tell us about yourself, how you came to write this book. Because I think it's amazing, you're writing a full book during the course of your graduate studies, and that's extremely rare first off, extremely ambitious. And you have a ton of it already produced, and you sent me portions of it, but I know there's a lot more that you've already been working on in one capacity or another, for a long time now. And also, I think this is a really wide ranging project, it covers a lot of disciplines and a lot of different fields. So, I'd really just like to hear your story a bit, about how this came to be.

Ibrahim Anoba ([02:27](#)):

Thank you, Anthony. It's a great honor to be on your program to talk about my project. Actually, the idea of writing this book started in 2019, early 2019, when I was writing a couple of articles for the Cato Institute's [Libertarianism.org](#) project, about the history of trade and commerce in ancient African civilizations. And the feedback I got from readers, about how they are fascinated about the facts in those articles, and how those articles that are just too short, the need for expansion. Of course, in those articles I have looked at the Aksumite civilization and the Egyptian civilization, how they constructed trade and commerce, and how these were the fulcrum of their civilizations.

Ibrahim Anoba ([03:36](#)):

So I thought, well, why not take it beyond antiquity or ancient Africa? And actually present arguments that would not only make the case for the fact that trade and commerce have always been an integral part of the African civilization, right from the Ancient Egyptians, to the many, many sub-Saharan African nations and civilizations, but also that the idea of writing about freedom, philosophizing freedom particularly, wasn't entirely a Western or American invention. Americans would often say freedom started, or the philosophizing of freedom started with the Enlightenment, significantly from the Enlightenment, or the American founding fathers, or they can go as far as the Ancient Greeks.

Ibrahim Anoba ([04:37](#)):

But before these individuals, Africans were already writing about freedom, emancipation, captivity. And in that process, not only giving us written documents about what they think freedom is, but also philosophizing those ideas. And I felt, well, this would be really, really beautiful to bring these ideas into fruition, or into a text, a book. Particularly to prove that those ideas did not at all, in the African sense, did not start with slave narratives that emerged in the early to mid 18th century. That Africans, black people, have always been philosophizing freedom, having always been toying and experimenting with it intellectually, as far as the recorded history of Africa is concerned.

Ibrahim Anoba ([05:43](#)):

So, I felt well, why can't I just start getting some chapters into the works? And I felt okay, this can be a book project as a [inaudible 00:05:55] to my PhD application in this year. I'm already doing my master's in research, which of course, is 70% of our research. So, why not give equal energy to that book project? And after producing four chapters of it, I sent it to a couple of Africanists, and classical liberal scholars, and got some very fascinating, and critical to be honest, critical reviews of how some of the arguments are not so strong to make the case that I'm trying to make. Which gave me the chance to develop, and re-send it to these scholars, and the reviews have been marvelous after since So, as you know as a historian yourself, when you get your hands dirty in these subjects, scratch the surface, the more you scratch, the more you see, the more you find. And the more you find, the more fascinated and hooked you become to that project, and this is the case of the book project.

Anthony Comegna ([07:05](#)):

Yeah, I love that you put it that way. Because I always say, if you come out of graduate school with your PhD, thinking that you know a whole bunch of stuff, you've done it completely wrong. What you should learn is how little you know, even about the thing that you've spent seven or eight or more years studying now. There's always so much more to it. And that's one of the things that I like about this whole project, that I think, if I may for a moment here, I see you very early in your career, building a very strong corpus of work here. You're starting what will be probably a very long-term set of projects, and that's wonderful, because it's very early on and there's so much to this.

Anthony Comegna ([07:57](#)):

African history, certainly in the West, has been either misrepresented or outright neglected in large part, until recent decades. And so, there's so much to do on this subject, and you cover the full range. You go all the way back to the earliest historical documents we have from the entire continent, and you bring it all the way up to essentially the present. So, that is quite a lot, and you cover archeology and anthropology, ethnography, you cover all sorts of languages, and you have to work within those different backgrounds, and switch from here to there, to this, to that, and all of these different things are specialist subjects. So, I am curious, how did you decide to structure the whole book? How are you going about putting it all together? I know I got just a scattershot of different chapters from you, but what is the overall product going to look like, ideally in the end?

Ibrahim Anoba ([09:00](#)):

Right, [inaudible 00:09:01] point out indirectly, that history is forever the most interdisciplinary project, or interdisciplinary discipline you can ever find. You can't really carry out successful historical projects without borrowing from other ideas, particularly in this case, archeology and anthropology, ethnography. And a short portion of the first part, the book is divided into three parts. The first part looks at literatures, the earliest literatures about freedom and philosophizing freedom in Africa, from

Ancient Egyptians to the 18th century, where the slave narratives as they emerge in Europe and North America.

Ibrahim Anoba ([09:49](#)):

And the second part is about the philosophy of African liberty, or African freedom, about the philosophical implications, or philosophical ideas that Africans have toyed with over the years, that leads to something that we can call, or bring together to form an African narrative or African philosophy of freedom. Then the third part is about how Africans have been arranging their societies since the end of the World War II, which of course is significant for Africa for many reasons. Of course, 1945 was when Africa had, or Africans had the 1945, Fifth Manchester Pan-African Congress, or Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester, that was in many, many ways definitive for the fight against colonialism, and anti-blackness across the world. Of course, 1945 marks the period where many African nationalists in Europe returned home to intensify a call for independence.

Ibrahim Anoba ([11:01](#)):

So, the book is primarily divided into these three parts. And as I was saying at the beginning, the reason why I took a much more archeological or ethnographic line in the first part of the book, is because you really cannot understand the many literatures that I've looked at in this part of the book, without making sure you set the foundational arguments, rooted in anthropology and ethnography, frankly. For instance, the first chapter of the book, talked about the Ancient Egyptian expulsion of an Asiatic nation, that ruled Egypt from 1638 to 1530 BCE. And you really cannot make an African narrative of freedom out of that case, for instance, without understanding what archeologists have done, or found recently, about the invaded nation, and what was life like during this period. Because this is a very, very ancient period in Ancient Egypt for any historian to just create an authority out of, or just take a part from, without giving huge, huge credence to what archeologists have done. And that resonates throughout the first part of the book, borrowing from these other disciplines to make my argument.

Anthony Comegna ([12:44](#)):

Yeah. Let's talk a little bit about those first liberation narratives that come about as a result of the Hyksos occupation of Egypt. Tell us a little bit about that story. And I'm especially curious, once the Egyptians expelled the invaders, was there actually some sort of popular memory, or narrative that got passed down, of what that meant?

Ibrahim Anoba ([13:09](#)):

Actually, this is a very, very interesting, and in many, many ways, different episode in the African narrative of freedom. Because first of all, that episode in Ancient Egypt, this was the 17th and 18th dynasty of Egypt, of course around 1600 BCE, where the literary culture was basically about hieroglyphics or carving on tombs and walls. And from the evidence archeologists have gathered from Avaris and Thebes, the two battlegrounds, not only in terms of war, but etiology or idea, during this exposure and invasion. And from what archeologists have found, we see that the idea of writing or expressing philosophical arguments, or making, I don't want to say, perhaps legal case for taking certain actions against oppression for freedom, first emerge in Africa as far as we know, during that period. And this of course, was about 1500 years after the unification of Egypt.

Ibrahim Anoba ([14:39](#)):

So, many students, we say the history of Ancient Egypt significantly started when Narmer, or Menes, the first Pharaoh of Egypt, united upper and lower Egypt around 3000 BCE. From then, we can actually start constructing Ancient Egyptian histories, many will argue that was the case. But about 1500 years later, these events happened. And it's from the inscription on tombs of the kings that were engaged in this episode, and from the papyrus from ordinary citizens' accounts, that I constructed this episode as a narrative of African history. Of course, it started with the Asiatics or the Hyksos as they were called, invading Egypt. And many will say it was not an invasion, but a progressional integration of the Asiatic into an Egyptian culture or Egyptian civilization. But in any case, by 1638, the Asiatic were ruling a significant portion of Egypt, or Ancient Egypt. And the Indigenous Egyptians, [inaudible 00:15:51] Indigenous Egyptians, were limited to an area of Egypt whose capital was Thebes. But the Asiatics, the foreigners controlled the majority of the land at the capital called Avaris, had controlled a lot of the Egyptian territory.

Ibrahim Anoba ([16:12](#)):

So, the Egyptians were tired. The Egyptians at Thebes, they got tired of this oppression, and they wage war over three generations, over three Pharaohs, against the Hyksos, trying to reclaim their land. And the reason why I think this is a very interesting episode in the African narrative of freedom, as the eminent historian [inaudible 00:16:41] pointed out, is one, because this is a classic, perhaps the oldest case of a black civilization or an African civilization, being oppressed by a white civilization, in that sense that's a strong case for why this narrative is important. But also, because the arguments made by the Pharaoh, the three Pharaohs, particularly the second Pharaoh... Of course, the three of them, the first was the Pharaoh Seqenenre Tao, the second, Kamose, the most important in this case, and Ahmose I.

Ibrahim Anoba ([17:23](#)):

Seqenenre Tao was killed during one of the battles against the Hyksos. After his death, there was a new Pharaoh called Kamose. And Kamose gave us what we can refer to as the logical argument for why the indigenous Egyptians in Thebes, felt it was necessary to wage many, many wars against these invaders to take back their land. For instance, in one of these stele, he tried to say something along the line of what you might consider today as arguments along the lines of the non-aggression principle. Kamose said, and I'm trying to quote him here. He said, "They, whomever comes to our lands and act against us, then do we act against them?" And this is a very short affirmation of, don't act against somebody, if they do not act against you. It's a classical case of non-aggression.

Ibrahim Anoba ([18:30](#)):

And somewhere else, he was frustrated. And he said, "He who partitions the land with me, will never respect me." Which is an argument for property right, that somebody that comes to your land, in this case Ancient Egypt, take the land from you, can never respect you. And if they do not respect you, then you are condemned to take back what is yours. Because in the first case, they have aggressed you, they have tried to forcefully put themselves against your freedom. And what I think is the most remarkable argument about Kamose for this Egyptian revenge against the Hyksos, was about tax, to be quite interesting.

Ibrahim Anoba ([19:18](#)):

And in one of the stele, he was transcribed to have said that, "To what end do I know my own strength? One chief is in Avaris," which is the capital of the Hyksos, [inaudible 00:19:31]. "Another is in Kush," which is in Nubia, "And I sit here," in Thebes, "Associated with an Asiatic and a Nubian. Each man has his

slice in this Egypt, and so the land is partitioned with me. None can pass through it, as far as Memphis, although it is Egyptian water. See, he has Hermopolis. No one can be at ease when they are milked by the taxes of the Asiatics," the Hyksos. "I shall grapple with him that I might crush his belly, my desire is to rescue Egypt, which the Asiatics have destroyed."

Ibrahim Anoba ([20:07](#)):

So, these three arguments, one about not aggressing against people that do not aggress against you, but when they come against you, you have the right to go against them. And the arguments about whomever sees your land, or invade your property cannot respect you. And also, the arguments about the Asiatics milking Egyptians with heavy taxation, I think are three key arguments that can construct this war that the Thebes Egyptians [inaudible 00:20:41] against the foreign occupiers, as not only a war of weapons and strategies, but also a philosophical war in some sense.

Anthony Comegna ([20:52](#)):

Oh, that's great. Thank you so much for that, because I was really curious about how this might translate throughout the rest of your book, with all the other chapters that I can see you putting in, and I see this coming together. And I wanted to ask you, because unfortunately again, I hate to say this, but one of the tropes in Western representations of African history has been that, oh well, the Ancient Egyptians weren't actually even African. They certainly weren't black Africans, they were more like olive-skinned Mediterranean Greeks.

Anthony Comegna ([21:27](#)):

And obviously this is wrong, and extraordinarily problematic, but you have a section where you quote, "Africanize," Saint Augustine, and talk about his contributions to the African tradition of liberty and liberalism. And I saw that, and of course I thought, oh my gosh, obviously Augustine is African, I can't stand how people argue otherwise. But this is a necessary argument, because I don't think there's much of an understanding that he's African. So, how are you going to place his ideas in the context of Africa, if you still have to establish that he was African? Tell us a bit about that. What are Augustine's credentials for being considered African, just like the Ancient Egyptians?

Ibrahim Anoba ([22:16](#)):

That's a very interesting question. I contemplated on maybe first of all, establishing Augustine's Africanness, or just delving straight into his ideas. But I'm like okay, I've read many, many books where scholars often present Augustine as a Roman, a theologian, a philosopher. Whereas Augustine himself does not mince words, when he affirmed his own Africanness, affirmed that he is African. First of all, his mother is a Berber, is an African. His father, okay, so maybe is a Roman. But Augustine identified more as a Berber, as an African Berber, than a Roman. Not only because he named his son Adeodatus, in pursuit or in accordance with Berber practice, but also because Augustine spent most of his life in Africa.

Ibrahim Anoba ([23:17](#)):

He also, I think on two occasions that I've identified in the book, affirmed his own Africanness. For one, I think it was in confessions, that he was referring to the Numidian born philosopher called Lucius Apuleius, and Augustine said, "Apuleius of Roma chose to speak, because as our own countryman, he is better known to us Africans, though born in a place of some note." So, in this one occasion, Augustine is referring to a compatriot, Lucius Apuleius, as an African, a countryman of ours, according to his own words.

Ibrahim Anoba ([24:08](#)):

Elsewhere, he said about the... I think about another figure in Numidia, and he called that person an African as well. And in that sense, affirming his own African identity, by calling that person his brother, his companion, his compatriot. For example, I think the man is [Pontitius 00:24:39], who was highly placed in the court of the Roman Emperor. And Pontitius had visited Augustine and his friend, Alypius, and Augustine was saying in confessions, that, "He had come to the house to see Alypius and me, Pontitianus, a countryman of ours insofar as he was an African." I mean, these are two direct evidence from Augustine's own writing, referring to himself as African, or an African, besides the fact that his mother was African. He lived, and became a bishop in Africa. So in that sense, he is an African.

Ibrahim Anoba ([25:23](#)):

But again, I do not really think it's always necessary to establish the Africanness of a scholar, or a theologian or a philosopher, before you make their case, or put their arguments in the African context. But I felt it was necessary in this case, because there have been many, many misconstrued identities imposed on Augustine, whereas he himself identifies as an African.

Ibrahim Anoba ([25:49](#)):

And of course, in that section on the chapter that I was talking about Augustine, I was pretty much talking about his ideas on free choice of the will, how Augustine doesn't believe that this church, or any saint, or any prophet should tell anybody that whatever they're doing is wrong. Because the prophet or the saint believe this should be the right way to act, because this is what God wants. So Augustine was saying, how do you know what good wants? How do you know this is the way people should live their life? In fact, God gave every man the right to have the freewill to choose, and decide good, evil, do whatever they want and he will be able to judge. So, that's pretty much what I was talking about in that section on Augustine.

Anthony Comegna ([26:39](#)):

I really hope you all enjoyed that, even a fraction as much as I did. I absolutely love learning more about these kinds of obscure figures, especially people who are unknown in Western circles, like my own. It's really great to stretch and expand the classical liberal tradition, as we tend to receive it. And I say that very deliberately, because after all, classical liberalism never was a set of revealed truths. It's not a religious creed. Classical liberalism has always been a movement in flux and development, incorporating bits and pieces of understanding from all over the world. And if we want huge swaths of our planet, like Africa, to be more free and more liberal, we should also do the work of understanding how Africa can make us more free and more liberal. Ibrahim Anoba is doing all of that kind of work and more, he has my utmost thanks for it. Go, thou and do like, keep the progress coming.