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WHAT IS AFRICAN HISTORY?

John Edward Philips

Whether Buddhas arise, O priests, or whether Buddhas do not arise, it remains a fact and the fixed and necessary constitution of being, that all its constituents are transitory.

—Siddhartha Gautama, Shakyamuni Buddha
(*Anguttara-Nikaya* iii.1134)

All history begins with the necessary and inescapable observation of change around us. Writing the history of anything, including Africa, involves finding out the nature, extent and pace of that change and trying to explain it.¹

The craft of writing history is best learned by reading history itself, rather than by reading theories or philosophies of history.² Reading history is the best way to learn to write history in part because history is a form of literature, and the best way to learn to write any kind of literature is to read it. If you want to write for the theater you should read a lot of plays. If you want to write mysteries you should read a lot of detective stories. If you want to write African history you should read a lot of African history, especially history written by the historians you most admire for their research, their interpretations, and their writing abilities. There are almost as many kinds and styles of history to choose from as there are historians, probably more, since many historians write more than one kind of history, and many works combine different types of history.

Because writing history, including African history, is a practical affair, this book is about the practice of African history. It will describe how historians of Africa investigate Africa's past, what sources they use and some of the ways they interpret those sources. It will also talk about several

of the major issues and themes of African history, because no historian can ignore such issues. But this is not a book about the theory or philosophy of history; rather, it is a practical guide to understanding and writing about Africa's past. Those who want to learn more than a minimum about historical theory will have to look at other books.³ This chapter, and the concluding one, will try to give as much theory as is necessary to understand and write African history.

A minimum of theory is necessary for a historian. Not all writing, not even all writing about the past, is history. Nor is all history good history. The assumptions of historical methods and perspectives are necessarily part of history. These assumptions are not really different for historians working on African topics and historians working on other areas of history. The historian who is aware of these assumptions will be able to write better history. But there are so many different historical perspectives concerning even such important and basic concepts as objectivity that the fledgling historian could be excused for thinking that even such a minimum consensus does not exist. Indeed, it is probably easier to define what history is not, than to define what exactly it is.

What History Is Not

History is not (necessarily) written by the winners. It is true that history is written by survivors, but as the late John Keynes pointed out, in the long run we are all dead. Much, perhaps most, of the history of certain periods and events seems to have been written by the losers, who returned home to lick their wounds and write self-justifications. One such case in Africa is the Kano Civil War of 1893–94. The first comprehensive account, and an abridged version of that account, were both written from the point of view of the losing side.⁴ No one writing a history of the Kano Civil War can afford to ignore these eyewitness accounts.

History today is full of "winners" with bad press. In Africa this includes slave trade kingdoms, colonial imperialists, and assorted individual tyrants, but in this respect Africa is no different from other parts of the globe, where the historical evaluation of different individuals, institutions, and movements rises and falls with each generation's reevaluation and rewriting of history. This revisionism, as it is called, is a regular part of the process of producing historical literature. Today's winners are tomorrow's losers, and tomorrow's historians (assuming there are any) will see things differently than today's do. No condition is permanent.

History is not lies agreed upon. Because history is supposed to be nonfiction, fiction is by definition *not* history, although novels and film (like any other remains from the past) can be useful sources for a historian trying to make sense of the past in which they were produced, though not the past in which they were set. Just because official lies are taught in a "history" class does not make them history. Without getting into the debate about whether "objectivity" is possible for historians,⁵ we can insist on the need for professional ethics. At the top of the list of such ethical values for historians must come honesty and fairness. Without honesty there can be no true history and without fairness, giving even the devils of history their due, our histories can be as unreliable as if they were simply not true. Ignoring important facts that don't fit our theories or prejudices can cause others to ignore our conclusions. Writing about events or persons which clearly never happened or existed is a quick way to have one's writings dismissed as fiction. In African history, as in other fields of history, this means taking the bad along with the good, and making an honest assessment of African shortcomings and failures, as well as the causes of those failures. History should be more than mere nationalist propaganda if it is to be taken seriously by intelligent adults.

History is not bunk. History may be unique among learned disciplines in that it has no specialized vocabulary of its own, but rather uses the specialized vocabulary of whatever field's history it is. Thus economic history uses the specialized vocabulary of economics, military history uses a military vocabulary, and so on. In addition, since one purpose of historical writing is to explain the past to nonspecialists, the good historian will avoid the use of specialized jargon that merely obfuscates its subject matter.

One result of this lack of specialized jargon and of bringing the subject matter down to a popular level is that many people think they know as much about history as a historian who has researched the primary sources.⁶ Of course they may know particular facts that even a historian of the period and topic might not know. No one can know everything. It is also a cliché that some of the best history is written by those who are not professional historians, but most such history is written by specialists of the subject matter—for instance, economic history written by economists and medical history written by medical doctors. But history that has been researched and written by a trained, professional historian (or by anyone else who understands the history he or she has researched) cannot be dismissed as bunk. It is an interpretation of the past that needs to be considered seriously as a statement about that past, and thus about how the present came to be.⁷

History is not just twenty-twenty hindsight. In trying to explain the past we should remember that events unfold in real time. We might spend years or even decades pondering someone else's mistake, but that mistake probably resulted from a decision that had to be made on the spur of the moment, with imperfect information and with several other problems impinging on the consciousness of the decision maker. It is easy to ransack archives to find evidence which can prove that such a quick decision was wrong. It is quite another matter to know what information was actually available to the decision-maker, much less why they made the decision they did. We should also remember that just as past people made mistakes, so do present historians. No one can know everything, and thus all history is provisional and incomplete. The need for modesty in our interpretations can be understood better by contemplating two films which present very plausible critiques of historians' methods and perspectives: Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) and John Ford's *The Man who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962).

The Man who Shot Liberty Valance could easily be interpreted as John Ford's response to the many historians who have criticized his films for the role they played in mythologizing the history of the American west, creating the images that historians now must struggle against in our attempt to make students understand that era in American history. During the film the hero, played by James Stewart, apparently kills a gunfighter, played by Lee Marvin, who has been terrorizing the settlers of a small community of farmers on behalf of powerful interests in the area. In a seemingly fair fight, with little but his own courage to support him, but with nearly the entire town as eyewitnesses, Stewart's character emerges as the hero of the common man, the defender of decency and law-abiding citizens. He goes on to a career as Senator and ambassador.

The truth, however, is not what it appears to be. Stewart's character doesn't really have the skill to have won a gunfight with a professional gunslinger. The man who really shoots Liberty Valance is John Wayne's character, who waits in the shadows off a side street while the rest of the town watches the conspicuous, noisy drama on the main street. When it looks like Stewart's character will lose the fight, Wayne's character fires at Marvin's. The sound of his gun is masked by the sound of the other guns in the fight, and with so many reliable witnesses, no one thinks to question the incident. Wayne's character can't admit to shooting a man who wasn't looking, of course, although he does tell Stewart's character later so that Stewart's character will not have problems with his conscience. Years later, in the film's framing device, Stewart's character tells the story to the

editor of the newspaper in the town where it all happened, while a reporter takes notes. At the end of the interview the editor seizes the reporter's notes and suppresses the story. "When the legend becomes fact," he says, "print the legend."

Ford has made a plausible case, if a necessarily fictional one, for an incident that probably no historian could find out the truth about. With eyewitnesses, newspaper accounts and other information available aplenty, few of us would even bother to investigate. Yet surely there could be many such instances in history, no matter how well documented. As a call to humility in our conclusions by historians it is worth listening to. If intended as a criticism of historians by a filmmaker it leaves something to be desired. Historians may not always get things right, but we do try to be accurate. Film directors, other than documentary makers, don't even try, and really shouldn't. They are producing fiction. Producing fiction is as legitimate an activity as writing nonfiction, but those who get their history from filmed (or any other) fiction should beware.⁸

Another, more famous movie, by a director much influenced by John Ford, poses an even more serious challenge to historians. Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) anticipated much of postmodernist discourse in dealing with questions of bias and the limits of human knowledge.⁹ Like *Liberty Valance*, this film is also narrated as a flashback, but instead of a single narrator delivering a truth that has been and will continue to be hidden, there are multiple narrators giving equally convincing (or equally unconvincing) accounts. This tale is also told even more indirectly than *Liberty Valance*. A monk and a woodcutter who witnessed the police investigation of a death narrate the testimony of others to a third man.

There is a corpse to be explained, and the violent death of a samurai. A bandit has confessed to the murder, but a woman he raped seems to implicate herself as the murderer. The ghost of the dead samurai also testifies through a medium, explaining that he has killed himself. All of the stories seem equally implausible, but instead of blaming others for the death, each witness implicates him or herself. Finally the woodcutter, who claims to have found the corpse in the woods, reveals that he knows more than he has told the police. He admits that he witnessed the killing, although he has hidden this knowledge from the police, but his account is no more convincing than the others. It even turns out that he has robbed the crime scene of a valuable dagger, and hidden his knowledge of the affair for his own profit. As the man listening to the narrated stories points out, humans can't tell the truth, even to themselves. We all want to forget something, so we make up stories.

History, too, whether based on written documents, oral tradition, physical evidence, or other sources, is as much a product of forgetfulness and deceit, deliberate and/or unconscious, as it is of remembering and recording, not only on the part of those who lived in the past, but on the part of historians in the present as well. Since no historian has enough time or space to reveal everything in the sources, history is inexorably as much about forgetting and concealing as it is about remembering, discovering, and revealing the truth. How can anyone really know the truth of what happened in the past, even the recent past?

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.
—Jesus of Nazareth (John 8:32)

What Is History, Really?

The very mundane fact is that history is a job, which may or may not pay very well, or at all, but which requires work and a certain set of skills, like any other job. According to the United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, a historian is a kind of social scientist. Specifically,

Historians research, analyze, and interpret the past. They use many sources of information in their research, including government and institutional records, newspapers and other periodicals, photographs, interviews, films, and unpublished manuscripts such as personal diaries and letters. Historians usually specialize in a specific country or region; in a particular time period; or in a particular field, such as social, intellectual, political, or diplomatic history. Biographers collect detailed information on individuals. Genealogists trace family histories. Other historians help study and preserve archival materials, artifacts, and historic buildings and sites.¹⁰

To put that briefly, a historian is someone who creates history, a coherent interpretation of the past based on remains of the past that survive into the present. This created "history" is, of course, different from "history" in the sense of actual past events, with which it should never be confused. Even that raw reality is different from the way that persons in the past experienced it, for human experience is always mediated, first by our senses and then by the interpretations our mind gives to the raw data of our senses. Few of us remember this fact in daily life, much less in our

academic interpretations of past reality.¹¹ History as we know it in the present is a form of created literature about the past. It is, or should be in so far as is possible, nonfiction literature, but it is still a form of created literature, an interpretation of the past in the present.

Thus history changes, but not because the past events it describes have changed. They no longer exist and thus can no longer change, except insofar as they have changed to become the present. History as an interpretation of the past changes because it is a human created artifact. We humans have limited brains and imperfect sense organs, and our understanding of the world around us, including its past, is necessarily limited by those brains and sense organs. We hope to collectively accumulate more information about our world, including its past, but there are inherent limits to human knowledge.

History changes not only because what human beings can know about our past changes but also because what humans want to know about our past changes. The problems of the present always inspire history in some way and to some extent, because history is written in the present, for an audience in the present, although (like everything else) it quickly becomes the past. The relative importance given to certain persons and events will change not only because new information about those persons and events is discovered, but because the perceived importance of their effects on the present has changed. Thus history will always be interpreted differently by each generation.

An important example of constantly changing interpretations of African history is the question of the nature, rate, and starting date of the Bantu expansion.¹² Bantu languages, including Swahili, Zulu, Kikuyu, Lingala, Kikongo and many, many others, are spread over a vast area, covering most of central, southern, and eastern Africa. They are spoken by so many of the inhabitants of Africa that they constitute a common stereotype of Africa in the minds of many non-Africans, and in many contexts, most notoriously in apartheid South Africa, the term "Bantu" has been more racial than linguistic. The close resemblance and relationship between Bantu languages was recognized by outsiders very readily. These languages must have diverged from a common ancestor and spread relatively recently, but in the absence of documentation, or even systematic archaeological investigation of such a vast area, the nature and direction of that spread, not just the details but even the point of origin (in both time and space) and general pattern of the expansion, have been controversial ever since historians and others first began to investigate the matter.

Joseph Greenberg's historically based reconstruction of the relations between African languages, including the internal relationships of the Bantu languages,¹³ was not widely accepted at first, especially by anthropologists and linguists who had not been trained to think historically. Malcolm Guthrie, a linguist who knew little of the principles of historical linguistics, made a geographical classification of Bantu languages, and looked at their vocabulary to find the area which was the most "Bantu" of all.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, he found this area in the middle of the Bantu language distribution area, where other language families and their loanwords had had the least influence. Roland Oliver, a historian who also knew little of linguistics and who was thus unable to evaluate the relative merits of the arguments of Greenberg and Guthrie, tried to combine Greenberg's apples with Guthrie's oranges, and came up with a fruit salad of an article about the Bantu expansion, that demonstrated, if little else, the necessity for historians to learn to understand the nature of source materials before using them.¹⁵ Discussion of Guthrie's Bantu data and conclusions at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) revolved around methods and sources that the historians of Africa at that time were largely unqualified to evaluate, and which they therefore made little comment on. "One surprising feature of this discussion is the lack of participation by historians."¹⁶ Oliver's influential conclusions were dictated more by academic politics than by ordinary rules of evidence, either linguistic or historical.¹⁷ His paradigm was gradually abandoned as more and more specialists looked at the data it was built on, especially Guthrie's classification of Bantu languages.¹⁸ This book is intended, in large part, to educate historians of Africa about the nature of the diverse sources that they use, so that they can better use those sources in reconstructing the African past.

Methods and sources other than linguistic are of course relevant to the historical construction of the spread of Bantu languages. The archaeologist D. W. Phillipson well summarized the then available archaeological evidence relating to the Bantu expansion for historians in an article he wrote some years back in *Scientific American*,¹⁹ later elaborated in his book *The Later Prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa*.²⁰ More recently Jan Vansina used detailed linguistic and other evidence to address the issue in his study of the history of central Africa, *Paths in the Rain Forest*,²¹ and has explained the methodology behind his new reconstructions in an article in the *Journal of African History*.²²

All of these interpretations, different as they are, share the belief that there was a recognizable group of people speaking a language that is now

called "Western Bantu." Most recently of all this linguistic category of "Western Bantu" as a distinct group has been challenged by Christopher Ehret, one of the authors of this volume, in an unpublished paper, "Is there a Western Bantu?" Ehret, following the work of several other historical linguists, argues that the "Western Bantu" languages are actually not a distinct group of Bantu languages descended from a single protolanguage, but rather are the residue of several distinct groups, which have not spread as widely as the languages in the Eastern Bantu group. So-called Western Bantu is, in this reconstruction, not a distinct genetic group itself, but a number of groups, each roughly coordinate with Eastern Bantu, incorrectly classified together.

Although each succeeding work should be (but isn't always) better informed, and its author may have more data than his or her predecessors did, none of them is the final word on the issue of the Bantu expansion. There never will be a final word on the Bantu expansion, and never can be, as long as there are historians around to study the issue. Historians in new times and various places will not only have new information and new perspectives on the issue, they will have their own ways of looking at the issue and writing about it, and they will be addressing new audiences who have new concerns they want answered by historians.

History is a conversation the present holds with the past. Each new generation in every society, from the time its members are old enough to ask "Why?" wants to know how the present came to be, what persons and forces created this world they were born into, and why it is the way it is. The exact questions and answers have always changed as each new generation has different interests and different problems, and as each older generation provides different answers. Each new generation in its turn becomes an older generation before passing away, and writes new answers for itself and for its heirs.

Because history is a conversation with the past, historians must keep in mind that the past used words differently. While history as a form of literature has no specialized vocabulary, history as research must have a specialized passive vocabulary, even if one is studying one's own society. All languages change, and the semantics of their vocabularies change also. Thus historians must be aware that the words of the past, whether transmitted in written documents or in oral traditions, may have had different meanings in the past than they do in the present. The meaning of oral and written testimonies from the past may not be readily apparent. Explaining those different meanings to readers in the present is an important aspect of writing history.

History is the sense we humans make of our past. The human experience may or may not really make sense in some absolute, transcendent sense. Human life may really be, as Macbeth comes to think, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."²³ But we do not like to think such things about the human experience, because it is our experience, and we, as humans, have a need to make sense of it. Thus history is a "humanity" and is often part of a college or department of humanities in universities.

By creating a written (or oral or filmed or multimedia) history in the present we impose "history" as a created narrative on the past. I do not mean, of course, that we can travel to the past to change it, but it is our interpretation of the past that turns the former reality of the past into a coherent narrative, a kind of story called "history." Historians must mediate the questions of the present and the reality of the past, thus keeping one foot in each time, and communicating between them. The stories we build for our contemporaries (and for those who will read our histories in the future) must take account of the concerns of the present as well as those of the past. Those of the future we can only dimly guess.

The need for coherent narration is a human universal. Every people tells folktales, from the smallest, most isolated, and technologically primitive stateless societies with their myths and legends, to the largest, most urban, and technologically advanced empires and federations. Folklorists have turned increasingly to the study of rumor and urban legends, and the Internet has proved a fertile spawning ground for new folklore.²⁴ Among all societies, at least some of this narration includes presumed nonfiction about the past. Such narration is history, whether it is oral history, written history, documentary historical film, or multimedia digital history.

History grew out of myth and legend. Such famous works of history as the Bible and the Japanese *Kojiki* (record of ancient events) begin with what many today would consider myth, regardless of how many people in former times, or even today, would consider them literal facts. Such ancient Greek historians as Herodotus believed literally in the physical existence of the Greek gods, as well as in the prescience of the pronouncements of the oracle of Delphi, things that few (if any) in the contemporary world would subscribe to. In Africa the "Kano Chronicle" similarly began with incredible events, such as a hunter, Dala, who slew elephants with a stick and carried them for nine miles on his head. The Kano Chronicle slowly extended its narrative to more recent periods and more plausible events.

Between oral societies and earlier ages of human existence on the one hand, and the contemporary world of computers and the Internet on the other, written narratives appeared almost as soon as writing itself. Among those written narratives, nonfiction (or at least presumed nonfiction) about the past, or written history, has usually been a prominent genre. In Greek mythology history had its own muse, Clio, a spirit who inspired historians to create their stories. Thus historians, although we are supposed to be writing nonfiction, should also be inspired both in the interpretations we give the past and in the words we use to express those interpretations.

The fact that history is a form of literature implies the possibility that the logic and coherence of the historical narrative historians create is not inherent in the past but is imposed by historians. Certainly the fact that historians have created many changing interpretations suggests that the logic of our narratives is something that we impose on the past, not something inherent in past events themselves. The very universality of narrative should remind us that such narrative logic is a human universal, and perhaps only a trick that our minds play on us. Part of our duty as historians is to uncover the logic of the humans of the past, and to understand the meaning they gave to their lives, why they did the things they did. To understand the sense they made of their lives and to explain it to our contemporaries is part of the task of historians in interpreting the past to the present. Thus we must remind ourselves that our predecessors, being human, saw stories in their own lives and times just as we do in our own. To write African history we must strive to understand the mindset and worldview of the Africans of the past that we write about.

History must make sense. Without narrative coherence the mere listing of facts might make a chronology, but it is not a history. Yet the interpretations that have been given to history are strikingly diverse, from the great-man and divine-plan theories of history, to racial interpretations, class struggle, and postmodernist paradigms. The search for interpretive logic has propelled history beyond itself, and thus history has given birth to other disciplines.

Therefore, today, the scholar in this field [history] needs to know the principles of politics, the (true) nature of existent things, and the differences among nations, places and periods with regards to ways of life, character qualities, customs, sects, schools and everything else. He further needs a comprehensive knowledge of present conditions in all these respects.

—Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah* (Rosenthal translation I:55–56)

History and Social Science²⁵

History is the mother of all social science. Not only is it the oldest and greatest of the social sciences, but it gave birth to the others. Social sciences were created to explain the facts of history, and their interrelationships. The first social scientist, Ibn Khaldun, was a historian who invented his *'ilm al 'umran* (science of society) in an attempt to explain the instability of dynasties in his native north Africa.²⁶ Good history today, even history that is not specifically sociological in orientation, often uses social scientific theories of causation and social structure. Good social science also retains its roots in history, and looks at how societies change over time, as all societies must. The ahistorical nature of so much colonial anthropology, always written in an "ethnographic present" that actually described the recent past, not only severely limited its ability to investigate change over time, but it also resulted in conclusions so mistaken that it gave itself a bad name. Those anthropologists whose work proved most enduring were those most interested in history.²⁷ Modern history and social science must stay in touch, for each is poorer without the other.

Because history is human history, the human-created story of humanity, it makes social science, systematic knowledge about human beings, possible. It was only as a result of the accumulation of historical data that serious comparison and analysis of societies became possible. A certain detachment, which might be called objectivity, was also necessary, as historians came to study enough different societies and enough different times to think about them, even about their own society, as just another human society to be analyzed. This intellectual *sang froid* became indispensable to the social sciences in such forms as cultural relativism, the ability to look at another society on its own terms in order to understand it better.

While Godlike objectivity is clearly impossible for a mere human, and almost any historian must select from more primary source material than he or she can use, not to mention interpret and arrange for intellectual consumption by others, honesty and fairness are necessary for writing good history. At the very least, the lack of obvious partisanship shown by historians who bend over backwards to accommodate the perspectives of others will make their conclusions more believable. In the debates that develop history, as in any debates, the ability to listen honestly and openmindedly to one's opponents' arguments, and therefore to counter or incorporate them as necessary, is important for historians.

Objectivity to a historian—like cultural relativism to a good cultural anthropologist—is an important tool for understanding a different society (in this case the past) and a working assumption basic to the method of the discipline. It is not an end in itself, and it is also an ideal which can only be approached, impossible to fully attain.

Unconscious assumptions are generally the most powerful, and the hardest to check. Those who most loudly proclaim their objectivity are often those farthest from their own ideal, precisely because they have never examined their own assumptions. Therefore a certain humility is necessary for a historian. This should perhaps be easiest for those working in a society other than the one we have grown up in, since there is so much we don't know about the society we study, and which the members of that society have to show and tell us, but the arrogance of so many colonial officers rings out from so many colonial archives, as an embarrassment to those who research those archives and a warning against complacency and self-satisfaction.

History is more than just a social scientific analysis of change over time, of course. It is a detective story. Readers of history want to know what really happened, and so historians investigate the past to find answers. Of course we can never know the whole truth of what happened, so historians are limited by our data, which exist in the present, in our quest to find out as much as we can about the past. Our conclusions are not restrained, however, by the Anglo-American criminal trial standard of proof beyond a reasonable doubt. They are rather similar to the standard of proof in a civil trial: the preponderance of the evidence, or (in other words) the most likely case.

The courtroom metaphor is apt because of the adversarial nature of so much historical writing. Historiographical controversies are often referred to as debates. Historians must present a case, not just facts but an argument about these facts and their significance, to a jury of our academic peers, as well as to the wider public. Because historians often think and work in this argumentative manner, building a case for their interpretation of events and trying to logically prove that case, history is good training for lawyers and politicians, who must also make arguments for their interpretations and their policies respectively.

The historian's obsession with facts is also similar to that of detectives trying to build a case about what actually happened in the past. This has led to a form of attempted objectivity which some wits have dubbed the "Dagnet" school of history, after the famously repeated line of Sergeant Joe Friday in that popular American television drama of the

1950s: "Just the facts, Ma'am." Of course historians write more than just facts. Simply by selecting the facts we use we build an argument about what happened in the past and its significance. Thus even the most factually objective history, devoid of any editorializing, is inherently making an argument. Joe Friday may have asked for "just the facts" when he was interrogating a potential witness, but he certainly selected from those facts and arranged them so that the District Attorney could build a case in court. Historians likewise use facts to make an argument, in our case to our colleagues and to public opinion.

Historians' primary sources are also similar to sources of evidence used by detectives. Linguistic evidence alone, among the major sources of evidence used by historians, is not used by detectives, because the time depth involved exceeds not only legal statutes of limitations but the lifespan of any known individual.

Both historians and detectives use physical evidence. The physical evidence used by historians is generally older, usually archaeological, but this is because historians usually work at greater time depth, not because there is an inherent difference in the argumentation about causation that the two professions make. The use of physical evidence makes advances in scientific analysis of data important for both detectives and historians, since we must both understand how to make the best use of the available physical evidence.

Historians and detectives also both use oral evidence. Detectives and historians working in more recent periods generally confine themselves to direct interviews, contemporary historians because most of their sources are alive, and detectives because indirect (hearsay) evidence is generally disallowed by courts, although it may provide detectives with useful leads to further evidence. The rules for evaluating oral evidence are different than those for evaluating other kinds of evidence, of course. But oral evidence is particularly important to African history, as it was to ancient western history. Herodotus, known as the "Father of History" for his writings about the ancient world, used oral sources, including much oral tradition, though he also used them far less carefully than would almost any historian today.

The modern Eurocentric assumption that historians can only work with written documents is a strange idea. Where it originated is hard to discover. Peter Novick²⁸ credited the idea to Langlois and Seignobos, specialists in the use of written historical documents who wrote around the end of the nineteenth century. He quoted their maxim "Pas de documents, pas d'histoire," making a mistranslation or misunderstanding of what these two historians were saying. In fact they defined "documents"

not as written materials but as any survivals of the past in the present.²⁹ Not only that, they explicitly included oral traditions, not just oral testimony taken down in written form, among historical sources: "...when the events to be related were ancient, so that no man then living could have witnessed them, and no account of them had been preserved by oral tradition, what then? Nothing was left but to collect documents of every kind, principally written ones, relating to the distant past which was to be studied."³⁰ This seems to suggest that oral traditions are to be preferred to purely documentary history.

The idea that historians work (or should work) only with written documents has had unfortunate effects on history in general (imagine if detectives were only allowed to introduce written evidence in court!), although the lack of written evidence for much of African history has mitigated those effects on the history of Africa. The idea, borrowed from literary criticism, that nothing exists outside the text,³¹ is useless for history. In fiction, of course, there *is* nothing outside the text. Shakespeare's *Othello* has a double time scheme, one in which the action takes place within a few days, the other in which it stretches over years.³² Such a dual time line is possible only in fiction, never in history. Was Hamlet really insane? That's up to the director. When did regular trade across the Sahara begin? That is to be investigated by historians to the best of their abilities by various means. It is not up to the historian's whim. Historians must never forget that we are writing a detective story about real human beings who lived and died. We can never read their true intentions, any more than we can read the minds of our contemporaries. If we doubt that their minds were just as real in their times as our own are in ours we ought not to write history.

The claim that Africa has no history because so much of its past was not documented in writing is an artifact of colonialism and a misrepresentation of both history and Africa. The emergence of African history as a field within history coincided with the rise of African nationalist and independence movements.³³ As African governments have come to play an independent role in world affairs, there has been more and more need to know and understand the history of Africa. As African educational and publishing industries have developed, Africans have researched and published more and more of their own history. Today African history is so well established that few, if any, scholars would doubt its place as a serious intellectual endeavor.³⁴

Despite the fact that the production of history does not depend on the existence of written documents, historians of course are always interested in finding written documents. This is not because history cannot

exist without written documents, but because written documents combine the attributes of two other kinds of documents in one. They are physical, and like the physical remains of the past that archaeologists are so expert in bringing to light and analyzing, they are survivals of the past whose existence does not depend on continuous retransmission in the minds of human beings. However, like oral tradition, they are verbal, they are human-created testimonies of the nature of the past which are therefore more easily understood by humans in the present, even though, like oral traditions, they reflect the biases of their creators. Written documents thus combine the advantages of archaeological evidence with the advantages of oral tradition, and are important sources of historical information, whenever they can be found, though of course they should always be supplemented with as many other kinds of sources as possible. They are simply another way in which the past speaks to the present, explaining, in their own way, how the present came to be.

What's past is prologue.

—William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* 2.1.247

What Makes History Different from Other Disciplines?

Hard lines should not and cannot be drawn between history and other disciplines. This is true not only because there are various approaches to history, but because there are histories of various subjects, each with its own disciplinary imperatives. In addition, all disciplinary boundaries are ultimately arbitrary human creations, thus subjective and subject to change, as has been shown by the recent explosion of interdisciplinary scholarship. In Japan archaeologists are considered historians. In the U.S. they are classified as anthropologists. Where lines are drawn between disciplines is arbitrary. The important thing is not to leave anything out in dividing up scholarship. Nevertheless, history has been recognized as a separate subject for so long that it is certainly legitimate to ask "What makes history history?"

History involves development over time. The interest in change in the past almost defines history. But the backward-looking nature of the historian, like the Sankofa bird of the Akan people, is peculiarly strong. Most of us have a self-image of facing forward into the future. This is true not only for westerners, but for many Africans, as shown by the example

of the Sankofa bird, which turns backward to face the past. If we are realistic however, we must admit that we cannot see the future clearly at all. We are all facing backwards from the caboose of the train of history, watching as the future races to become the past at the startling speed of sixty minutes an hour, twenty-four hours a day, nonstop for our whole lives. As events hurtle past us, and we try to influence them in our favor, they become the past almost before we know it, and move ever farther from our view. To understand and explain those past events, even (or perhaps especially) the ones from before we were born, is the task of historians.

Understanding the story of the past is the key to the most important aspect of historical narration: the problem of causation. This is what makes some facts more important than others, the fact that they helped to cause more other, later facts than did other facts in their own day. Many Muslim preachers denounced sinful practices. Why did Usuman Danfodiyo's denunciations lead to revolts, and become so influential even far from where he lived? What factors led to the collapse of the Oyo Empire? That the second question sounds as if it came from an undergraduate midterm is no coincidence. It shows how historians think, and the kind of thinking we want to give our students. Of course every cause that can be enumerated has its own causes in turn, extending back to the Big Bang, God, or perhaps *ad infinitum*. Thus history is a complex, even chaotic, web in which every event is an effect (usually of several causes, known and unknown) and many of those effects are themselves causes of other events. Trying to understand and explain this web of cause and effect is the job of the historian.

This same obsession with causation is the key to the notorious obsession historians have with dates. The more exact a date the better it is, but relative dates have an important place, especially if those are the only dates we can get. Dates are necessary to prove causation. *Post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore because of this) may be a common fallacy, but *Ante hoc ergo propter hoc* (before this, therefore because of this) is so absurd as to be unimaginable. Things that happen earlier in time may (but don't necessarily) cause things which happen later. Things that happen later can never cause things that happen earlier, at least in our universe.

History is not an experimental science. "What would have happened if?" questions are inherently counterfactual, and therefore fictional, beyond the realm of history, however much we historians may like to indulge ourselves at times in imagining them. Historians are not God. We cannot construct an alternate universe in which the Berlin West Africa Conference failed to reach agreement, or in which Kwame Nkrumah died

young, just to see what would have happened. Such inability to scientifically replicate conditions makes proving any causation difficult, as in many social sciences, and even in some physical sciences. But causation is of the essence in history and therefore chronology is equally essential. If it can be shown that Africans living south of the Sahara practiced iron smelting before north Africans, Indonesians, or any other people who might have been in contact with them did, then there must have been an independent invention of iron-smelting in Africa south of the Sahara. The future cannot cause the past.

Why belabor this seemingly obvious point? Because it is so obvious that it can be lost sight of. Consider the case of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. In his book *The Savage Mind*³⁵ he attempted an understanding of history that frustrated or infuriated many historians. He contrasted history with anthropology by claiming that anthropology, in his conception, was ahistorical, concerned only with things synchronically, as they are at a single point in time. History, to Lévi-Strauss, was simply a discontinuous but chronological catalogue of discrete facts, to illustrate which he drew a "rectangular matrix" (actually just a pattern of dots.) He actually argued that "It is thus not only fallacious but contradictory to conceive of the historical process as a continuous development."³⁶

Too many other historians have taken on the poor professor's misunderstandings of history for me to waste time repeating all their arguments.³⁷ Instead I would like to show some sympathy for him. His version of history can easily be recognized by anyone who has sat through a boring secondary school history class, in which the lesson consisted of a series of disconnected and apparently irrelevant names and dates that were to be memorized for an examination. Lévi-Strauss must have sworn never to take another history class again, and to study only societies that had no history and knew nothing of the subject. Was it his fault that the ungrateful primitives with their savage minds now wanted to insist that they had their own history? He would never have anything to do with it. And so his kind of structural anthropology would become more irrelevant with each passing day, until he himself became just a historical curiosity.

Other social science becomes more relevant with every new day. New theories of causation draw particular attention. Historians must soon move from our dominant, nineteenth-century, logical-positivist assumptions about straightforward, clearly intelligible causation and begin to embrace such insights as chaos theory and self-organized criticality into the way we conceive of change. We have already come far from the time of Herodotus, whose sense of causation sometimes involved little more

than "Thus the oracle was fulfilled." We can never really fully understand reality, of course, but we can strive to do better than previous generations have done by incorporating new insights from other disciplines not only into our sources of data but also into our understanding of causation.³⁸ Historical paradigms, like any other paradigms, change and will continue to change over time, but they will continue to try to make sense of the past to the present.

In their history verily there is a lesson for men of understanding.

—*Qur'an* (12:111)

What Makes History Good?

While we historians look at history as an end in itself, most of our students and readers see it as a means to an end, and look for lessons in history, lessons that historians may be reluctant to draw. Historians should, as the most important lesson of history, try to give our readers an insight into another time and perhaps even another place. We should not just provide new information, raw facts, but should also make people think in new ways by explaining to them how things were in an era they can never enter into. This will truly make history a kind of education, a word whose Latin origin means "leading out," suggesting the analogy of Plato's cave, the inhabitants of which mistook the flickering shadows thrown by a fire behind them on the walls of the cave for reality, until they were led out of the darkness and shown the world outside. Teaching must be a leading out from the darkness of ignorance, a sharing of the results of our investigations with others.

We do research to be surprised. After all, if we already knew what we would find, why would we need to do the research? We should also expect to surprise others with our research findings. One thing I have learned doing research is that all that stuff "everybody knows" to be true isn't necessarily so. This is not to advocate mere revisionism for revisionism's sake, a problem in a competitive academic environment where one may have to justify yet another study of an already overstudied question. It is rather to point out that we must challenge ourselves to learn and to change our ideas even as we seek to change the ideas of our readers and students.

The most important way we can help our readers and students to understand the time and place of our subject matter is by Africanizing history. This is an essential and obvious fact about African history, but one that cannot be stressed too much. It is also easier to say than to do,

even for Africans, since Africa is such a wide and complex continent and since its history is so old. This can make other times and places of Africa's past almost as strange to Africans from other times and places as to anyone else. But all of us, African or not, must strive, first to understand the time and place we research and write about, then to help our students and readers understand it, so that it is no longer simply an exotic and mysterious "other."

Whether we call it Afrocentrism or Afrocentricity, Africanizing history must mean more than just the insistence that the ancient Egyptians were Black (however "Black" is defined). If Alan Moorehead's books *The Blue Nile* and *The White Nile*³⁹ had begun with paragraphs asserting the Black African identity of the Egyptians, they would have been no less Eurocentric for having said so, since those books were not really about Africans at all. They were concerned with the story of Europeans in Africa, and Africans, of whatever color, were no more part of the story than were the wild animals and exotic tropical scenery that also filled those books.

Africa is not just a continent, but a people or related and interacting peoples. Because history is about human beings, the history of Africa is not the history of the African continent as much as it is the history of African people. To write African history is to write the history of African people and the changes Africans have gone through. Thus the history of Africa must connect to the history of the African diaspora more than it connects to any other part of the world, not just because the slave trade both affected Africa and created its diaspora, but because the stories of Africa and of the African diaspora have been intertwined since the time of the slave trade.

Africanization of history cannot stop at simply pointing out the connections between the inhabitants of the continent and the African diaspora, either. We must, as much as possible, use African sources, both primary and secondary, in reconstructing the African past. We must strive to understand the ideas of the African time and place we study, to realize how Africans of the past conceptualized the world around them, including their societies, and to try to figure out how they would have thought about the changes that were happening around them and to them. Thus even archaeologists must consult living Africans, especially those with knowledge of how Africans of the past made and used the artifacts found in archaeological sites, in order to properly understand the remains of the past that Africa's land contains. This may involve learning African languages, not just as a means to communicate with ordinary Africans (for which

interpreters may suffice) but in order to open the doors of our perception to the conceptual universe of the Africans we study. This is especially true, of course, for historians from outside the continent, but it can also be true for historians from Africa, if they want to understand other parts of Africa, or the interactions of different peoples.

Thus not only our sources but also our conclusions should be expressible in the African language of the people we study, if we are to write a true story about African people. We are trying to understand how some people experienced the past and then to explain that experience of the past to others in our own and future times. The multiplicity of African experiences, peoples, languages and sources make this a problem for Africans almost as much as for anyone else, of course, especially if they wish to try to be fair and honest about peoples they may not have been brought up to see as friendly. But that very multiplicity of African perspectives is one of the points we have to explain, at least outside of Africa, where the continent is often mistakenly seen as somehow homogenous.

Writing history perfectly is an impossible task, like any kind of perfection. But without striving for perfection we would never be able to do the best we can. Africa deserves to be understood better than it is. Africa's past is part of it that needs to be understood most, since that is how its present came to be. Let all of us who work to write Africa's past strive to write it as best we can.

Notes

1. A previous version of this chapter was read on August 23, 2000, to the Department of History, University of Jos, Nigeria, as "The Case for African History."

2. One of the few exceptions, a philosophical book about history that is extremely practical, is David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York, 1970). This systematic catalogue of historians' muddled thinking should be studied by every historian and reader of history as a guide to clear thinking.

3. There are several good general introductions to contemporary historical studies, although none of them deal with Africa specifically and few of them do more than mention African history. A highly theoretical treatment of history is found in Robert J. Berkhofer's *Beyond the Great Story* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1995). It is especially useful for its thorough review of the relevant literature in the various debates about the meaning and importance of history. More accessible introductions to current literature and debates include Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob's *Telling the Truth about History* (New York and London, 1994) and Richard Evans's *In Defense of History* (London, 1997). This latter is likely to replace both Marc Bloch's *The Historian's Craft* (New York, 1953) and E. H. Carr's *What is History* (New York, 1961) as standard textbooks.

4. Muhammad Aminu, *Fayd al-Qadir li-awsaf al-malik al-khatir* manuscript 51 in Jos Museum Arabic collection; Muhammad Aminu, *Wajiz Mulakhkhas min al-awal al-tawil* manuscript 52 in Jos Museum Arabic collection (abridged summary of *Fayd al-Qadir*).

5. The debate was surveyed in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream* (Cambridge and New York, 1988).

6. Primary sources are sources that are not based on other sources, or whose sources are lost. Thus we cannot find the sources they are based on in our search for information, and they are "primary." Secondary sources are based on other sources which are still available. Historians use primary sources to write secondary sources.

7. In the field of African history Basil Davidson comes to mind as one of the great historians who was not professionally trained as a historian. His work depends on the extensive use of secondary works by professionally trained historians, and represents a popularization of their work. His contributions to African history show not only the importance of connection to a wider public for the discipline of history, but also the necessity of skilled writing for making that connection. History is as much literature as it is a social science, and it must keep one foot firmly in the humanities, even as it keeps the other foot firmly in the social sciences.

8. A collection of responses by historians to specific Hollywood films can be found in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York, 1996) edited by Mark C. Carnes, Ted Mico, and John Miller-Monzon.

9. Rashomon has arguably become an English word. Daqing Yang described the controversy in Japan over the 'Rape of Nanjing' as "a twentieth century Rashomon" ("The Nanjing Atrocity: The Making of a Twentieth Century Rashomon," Masters thesis [University of Hawaii at Manoa, 1989], cited in Daqing Yang, "Convergence or Divergence? Recent Historical Writings on the Rape of Nanjing," *The American Historical Review* 104 (3 June 1999): 859).

10. <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos054.htm>.

11. Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rain Forests* (Madison, 1990), 71-73.

12. For a good analysis of the historiography of the problem of the Bantu expansion see Jan Vansina's "Bantu in the Crystal Ball," *History in Africa*, vol. 6 (Atlanta, Ga., 1979), 287-333, and vol. 7 (1980), 293-325.

13. Joseph Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa* (Indianapolis, 1960).

14. Malcolm Guthrie, *Comparative Bantu: An Introduction to the Comparative Linguistics and Prehistory of the Bantu Languages* (London, 1960).

15. Roland Oliver, "The Problem of the Bantu Expansion," *Journal of African History* 7 (1966) p. et seq.

16. Colin Flight, "The Bantu Expansion and the SOAS Network," *History in Africa* 15 (1988): 261-301.

17. Unfortunately, as Vansina has pointed out ("Bantu in the Crystal Ball," 1:294) this has been typical in academic and other investigations of the Bantu expansion.

18. For details see Vansina, "Bantu in the Crystal Ball," vol. 2, esp. 300-311.

19. D. W. Phillipson, "The Spread of the Bantu Language," *Scientific American* (April 1977): 106.

20. D. W. Phillipson, *The Later Prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa* (New York, 1979). See also his *African Archaeology* (Cambridge, 1985, 1993).

21. Op. cit.

22. "New Linguistic Evidence and 'the Bantu Expansion,'" *Journal of African History* 36, 2 (1995): 173-95.

23. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 5.5. 27-28.

24. There are many Internet sites devoted to urban legends and Internet folklore. Among search engine sites devoted to these phenomena are <http://urbanlegends.miningco.com/culture/urbanlegends/> and http://dir.yahoo.com/Society_and_Culture/Mythology_and_Folklore/Urban_Legends/.

25. Observant readers will already have noted that I straddle the divide between those who hold that history belongs in the humanities and those who feel that history should be counted among the social sciences. In fact I once unsubscribed to an Internet mailing list when the other participants began arguing this very topic. Ultimately it may matter little how the various subsets of human knowledge are divided into classes, as long as nothing is left out of the division. Very good arguments can be made on either side of this dichotomy, and in fact the categories of "humanities" and "social sciences" are rather artificial and not necessarily mutually exclusive.

In practice, most historians take a pragmatic approach to the question of whether history belongs in the humanities or the social sciences. If the National Endowment for the Humanities is handing out money, historians are all humanists. If the Social Science Research Council is in charge of the funding, they are just as firmly social scientists.

26. For a study of Ibn Khaldun's place in the history of modern thought, which places his new social science in the context of its contributions to Western thought, see Fuad Baali, *Society, State and Urbanism: Ibn Khaldun's Sociological Thought* (Albany, 1988).

27. E.g., M. G. Smith, *Government in Kano, 1350-1950* (Boulder, 1997), edited by Shula Marks and Paul E. Lovejoy.

28. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 39.

29. "Les documents sont les traces qu'ont laissées les pensées et les actes des hommes d'autrefois," Langlois and Ch. Seignobos, *Introduction aux études historiques*, chap. 5 (Paris 1898, 1992). The English translation reads: "Documents are the traces which have been left by the thoughts and actions of men of former times" (G. G. Berry, trans., *Introduction to the Study of History* (New York 1898).

30. Berry, *Introduction to the Study of History*, 20. The original reads "Mais s'agissait-il d'événements anciens, qu'aucun homme vivant n'avait pu voir et dont la tradition orale n'avait gardé aucun souvenir? Il n'y avait pas d'autre moyen que de réunir des documents de toute sorte, principalement des écrits relatifs au passé lointain dont on s'occupait" (Langlois and Seignobos, *Introduction aux études historiques*, 31).

31. Jacques Derrida's famous "Il n'y a pas d'hors texte," often translated as "There is nothing outside the text," quoted in Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*, 10.

32. E. A. J. Honigsmann, *The Arden Shakespeare: Othello* (Surrey, 1997), 68-72.

33. A recent symposium on the beginnings of African history as an academic subject in Britain was published as *The Emergence of African History at British Universities*, ed. Anthony Kirk-Greene (Oxford, 1995).

34. "Nobody in his right mind would argue any more that African history does not exist." Henk Wesseling, "Overseas History," in Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (University Park, Pa., 1992), 75.

35. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, 1966), translation from the French original, *La Pensée sauvage* (Paris, 1962).

36. Lévi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*, 260.

37. A good example is M. I. Finley *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York, 1975). An example from an Africanist is Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison; 1985), 162–65.

38. A good first step towards incorporating chaos theory into history was Nikki Keddie's study of the historical process of the Iranian revolution in *Debating Revolutions* (New York, 1995).

39. Alan Moorehead, *The Blue Nile* (New York, 1962) and *The White Nile* (New York, 1971).

PART II

Sources of Data

2

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE AFRICAN PAST

Susan Keech McIntosh

In his Preface to *Africa in Time Perspective*, the classic work that was the inspiration for the present volume, Daniel McCall notes that he had visualized the volume "as a handbook which would provide the neophyte with an adequate guide to the use of all the techniques of research in the varied and confusing fields of historical research. Certainly, we need such a book."¹ Almost forty years after the publication of McCall's book, which so admirably served this purpose, an update is just as certainly needed. But the archaeologist contributing to this project is faced with the same dilemma noted by McCall, namely, that archaeology already has "adequate handbooks which are in greater amplitude than could be squeezed into a book that has to cover so many other topics."² McCall resolved this dilemma by writing with brevity on the subject of archaeology, restricting himself to a number of essential points, several of which have lost none of their relevance.

Following McCall's example, I attempt here to present a number of issues that I believe to be central for anyone, but especially historians, hoping to better understand the enterprise of archaeology in Africa today. McCall's admirable brevity will not, alas, be repeated, partly because archaeology is today a much more contentious and diverse discipline than it was in the 1950s and early 1960s. At that time, African archaeology was the enterprise of a remarkably small and relatively homogenous group of active fieldworkers. Virtually all were European, a fact which united them, in terms of archaeological practice and interpretation, more than their different nationalities