

REVIEW ARTICLE

METHODS AND SOURCES FOR AFRICAN HISTORY REVISITED

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WRITING African History pays homage to Daniel McCall's pioneering text, *Africa in Time Perspective: A Discussion of Historical Reconstruction from Unwritten Sources*, published at the dawn of the era of modern African history in 1964. Surprisingly, given subsequent developments in the field, there has been no comparable text since,¹ making this volume especially welcome. But it also bears a heavy burden if it is to become the authoritative text for the next generations of students and scholars. Does it meet this difficult test?

The answer, befitting such a large multi-authored collection, is 'yes and no'. Individual articles vary in quality and coverage, with the best providing detailed guidance on the evaluation and interpretation of different kinds of data, while others provide only brief sketches with little discussion of sources or methods at all. The contributions thus do not provide uniformly reliable guides to their respective areas, and many will need to be supplemented by other works, some of which I suggest here.

The volume is divided into four parts. The first and last consist of remarks by the editor that set the practice of African history within that of history as a whole, including discussions of how to frame research questions; collect, evaluate, organize, and interpret data; and write. These are thoughtful meditations on historical practice that place African history firmly in the historical mainstream, though there is little discussion of how it has also influenced that mainstream.

From there, Philips turns to the less usual sources – archaeological, linguistic, oral, biological – that have come to mark the practice of African history specifically. While precolonial African historians first turned to such sources to overcome the relative lack of written and documentary sources, they soon become much

* My thanks to Gareth Austin, Florence Bernault, Andreas Eckert, David Henige, Neil Kodesh and Jan Vansina for their helpful comments and suggestions.

¹ There have, however, been a number of less comprehensive studies and collections, including: Jan Vansina *et al.* (eds.), *The Historian in Tropical Africa* (London, 1964); Creighton Gabel and Norman Bennett (eds.), *Reconstructing African Culture History* (Boston MA, 1967); S. O. Biobaku (ed.), *Sources of Yoruba History* (Oxford, 1973); Joseph Ki-Zerbo (ed.), *UNESCO General History of Africa*, 1: *Methodology and Prehistory* (Berkeley, 1980); Thomas Spear, *Kenya's Past: An Introduction to Historical Method in Africa* (London, 1981); Christopher Ehret and Merrick Posnansky (eds.), *The Archaeological and Linguistic Reconstruction of African History* (Berkeley, 1982); and Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings (eds.), *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed* (Rochester NY, 2003). Notable throughout has been the journal of method, *History in Africa*, edited by David Henige, from 1974 to the present.

more than that, critically expanding our understanding of the perspectives of the societies and times we study. As Philips rightly notes:

We must ... use African sources in reconstructing the African past ... to understand the ideas of the African time and place we study, to realize how Africans of the past conceptualized the world around them ... and to try to figure out how they would have thought about the changes that were happening around them. (p. 44)

As a result, many of these sources have now become vital for colonial and post-colonial history as well. Yet to employ such unusual sources, Philips continues, it is not sufficient simply to accept a particular scholar's conclusions, but, as with all sources, we must learn to treat them critically by becoming literate in the methodology and epistemology of disciplines far removed from our own.

Teaching such disciplinary literacy is the focus of Part II, where different disciplinary practitioners discuss the use of archaeological, linguistic, biological, oral and documentary sources for the writing of African history. Part III then shifts the focus to different historical genres – social history, economic history, art history, women's history and the like – but the distinction between the two parts is not always clear, and some of the articles here also provide worthwhile methodological discussions while others merely make appeals to adopt a particular genre. Given the different foci and uneven scope of the individual contributions, then, I have organized the following discussion by source areas, grouping individual contributions from throughout the book and offering suggestions for additional readings where appropriate.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Susan Keech McIntosh's article on 'Archaeology and the reconstruction of the African past' provides an exemplary analysis of the nature of archaeological data and its interpretation. She opens with an insightful discussion of the different conceptual approaches that have marked archaeology in Africa, starting with culture history and proceeding through processual and post-processual, Marxist and neo-Marxist, structuralist and post-modernist schools, informing us of the particular methodological approaches and interpretative frameworks of each (pp. 52–8).

Equally important, McIntosh continues, is an understanding of the three fundamental principles that underlie the collection and interpretation of archaeological data. Like history, chronology is the guiding principle, and it governs the basic excavation strategy of uncovering layer after layer of deposits to establish the basic historical sequence, or stratigraphy, of the site. Individual items can then be dated relatively as to whether they precede, are contemporary with or follow other items, with contemporary items assumed to constitute a single time period or culture (which may then be dated absolutely using various chemical dating techniques), while successive ones represent historical transitions. The second fundamental principle is analogy, the comparison of archaeological data with ethnographic and historical data to interpret and expand on it. Such analogies are rarely exact, however, especially when they are drawn from generalized and widely separated cases, as the frequent misguided recourse to San analogies for early human behavior has shown.² Finally, the third

² Edwin Wilmsen, 'Further lessons in Kalahari ethnography and history', *History in Africa*, 30 (2003), 327–420.

principle is careful study of pre- and post-depositional processes to establish how a site might have been disturbed by physical occurrences, such as flooding or burrowing (pp. 58–62).

In the process of these discussions, McIntosh provides an excellent overview of the best practices currently employed in the field, but there is much that she is unable to cover in a short article.³ Perhaps the most notable omission is a critical analysis of past practices, some of which were responsible for producing serious historical errors that still linger today. Archaeologists are limited to collecting material items that survive natural decay and human destruction, including human and animal bones, pottery, metal work, settlement residues, seeds and pollen and so forth. Such items rarely speak for themselves, however, but must be interpreted to infer their significance, with, for example, the presence of certain tools taken as indicative of related economic activities, pottery of cultural styles, seeds of certain crops, settlement patterns of social organization and burials of religious beliefs. Some interpretations, such as those concerning settlement patterns or the exploitation of certain plants or animals, may be fairly direct, while others, such as those concerning religious beliefs, political institutions or historical processes, must be conjectural.

In making such interpretations, however, archaeologists make certain assumptions, often unverifiable, about the nature and significance of their data. Classifying and determining the historical significance of different pottery styles are indicative of such interpretative problems, as archaeologists have differed markedly in their judgements of what constituted a style, whether such styles represented distinct cultural groups and whether different styles resulted from external forces or internal changes. In classifying pottery into distinctive styles, associating each style with a different culture, and interpreting cultural/stylistic changes in terms of successive displacements of one culture by another, archaeologists have long favored exogenous historical models over endogenously generated ones, but subsequent studies have shown that classification of different styles was frequently subjective and migration scenarios were over emphasized.⁴ This tendency to view African societies as discrete and timeless and change as coming from without became especially problematic when such archaeological ‘cultures’ were lumped with linguistic and ethnographic units into bounded self-contained units ricocheting around Africa.⁵

HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS

Archaeology is often paired with historical linguistics in the writing of early African history, as discussed here by Christopher Ehret. Ehret carefully lays out the two principal contributions of historical linguists to history: establishing

³ There are several excellent works for the historian interested in understanding past and present archaeological practice in Africa, foremost among them Ann Stahl (ed.), *African Archaeology: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford, 2005); Susan Keech McIntosh (ed.), *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa* (Cambridge, 1999); Joseph Vogel (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Precolonial Africa: Archaeology, History, Languages, Cultures, and Environments* (Walnut Creek CA, 1997); and Martin Hall, *Archaeology Africa* (London, 1996).

⁴ For an example, see Thomas Spear, ‘Early Swahili history reconsidered’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 33 (2000), 265–71.

⁵ But for an exemplary contrary view emphasizing endogenous development, see Graham Connah, *African Civilizations: Precolonial Cities and States in Tropical Africa: An Archaeological Perspective* (Cambridge, 1987).

genetic relationships among different languages and determining the provenance of individual words. The first seeks to establish relationships among different languages and then to rank them in the familiar family tree diagram that implies historical relations among the peoples who spoke them, while the second seeks to trace the origins of individual words, whether inherited or borrowed, to establish their provenance, and, by inference, that of the things they signify.

Both activities are based on comparisons of different languages' grammar, vocabulary and phonology to establish the relationships between them (pp. 87–98). Two methods are commonly employed: the Comparative Method and lexicostatistics. The Comparative Method is the more intensive method preferred by professional linguists and involves making detailed comparisons of structure (grammar), lexis (vocabulary) and phonology to establish precise relationships between different languages. Lexicostatistics, by contrast, is the more expedient (and usually less reliable) method favored by many African historians and consists of collecting standard word lists of the subject languages, comparing individual words to establish cognates between them and calculating the percentage of cognates they share to establish their relative similarity. Both methods require linguists to make principled judgements regarding the nature of the relationship of every word pair examined based on sound correspondences between the languages under consideration, but such judgements are rarely as precise as the percentages of cognate vocabulary enumerated or the tree diagrams derived from them imply, and they must be treated as probabilities, not historical facts.⁶

There are other problems that Ehret does not make clear. First is the identification of individual languages with discrete social groups, such that the 'X language' and the people who speak it ('X-speakers') rapidly elide into 'the X people'. Yet languages (or more accurately, a group of people speaking a specific language) and social groups rarely have sharply defined borders that coincide with one another, and treating the two as a single entity often results in misleading diffusionist models, such as the well-known problem of 'Bantu migrations'. This problem is compounded by the use of tree diagrams, which imply tidy successions of mother/daughter languages (and peoples) advancing across the landscape. But languages and peoples can change independently of one another, and divergence is only one of several models of language development (cf. Ehret, pp. 89–90). The diffusion of English over the world today is a case in point, and there are many parallel cases in Africa.

This tendency is compounded when such languages/peoples are associated with particular cultures identified by archaeologists, who also tended to see cultural change in terms of diffusion rather than of changes internal to those cultures, as we have seen. But correlation of linguistic and archaeological categories is never easy, as the two methodologies and epistemologies are mutually exclusive, and thus historians must be particularly alert to the circular

⁶ An excellent guide to the Comparative Method and its implications for historians is Derek Nurse, 'The contribution of linguistics to the study of history in Africa', *Journal of African History (JAH)*, 38 (1997), 359–91. For notable examples of the application of historical linguistics, David Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, A Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender, and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th century* (Portsmouth NH, 1998), and Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, 1990).

reasoning inherent when analysts uncritically lump languages with peoples and cultures. Such associations can never be assumed, but can only be posited through the careful analysis of independent linguistic and archaeological data that may then affirm possible chronological, areal or cultural connections between the two.⁷

A third potential problem encountered in linguistic sources is that of dating. While both linguistic classification and the study of words produce relative chronologies between mother and daughter languages or the timing of respective word borrowings, neither provides an absolute chronology. Linguists attempt to calculate this by assuming a standard rate of change in vocabulary over time (a practice known as glottochronology), but most linguistics now reject this procedure (cf. Ehret, pp. 106–8). Ostensible parallels with archaeology are instructive, where archaeologists must subject particular samples to chemical dating processes, such as carbon 14, to obtain an absolute chronology, but statistical problems can result in dates ranging over centuries, and problems of associating dated objects with others are endless. Both linguistic and archaeological dating are thus based on different and incompatible sets of statistical assumptions and probabilities, but once calculated, such dates project an air of certainty, making it tempting to associate related archaeological and linguistic finds. Yet rarely are the two sufficiently precise to allow this with any degree of certainty without additional evidence.

In conclusion, historical linguistics is a powerful tool that can provide both broad historical relationships and detailed cultural data about peoples' environments, livelihoods, social organization, political practices and beliefs. But one must be alert to its methodological and interpretative assumptions and subject them to rigorous criticism lest it lead us to overly simplified and flawed historical accounts.⁸

ORAL SOURCES

Oral traditions are the third leg of the methodological stool on which much of precolonial history rests, but oral sources as a whole – including oral testimonies and life histories as well as oral traditions – have broad relevance to all African history and share many of the same problems. Yet the discussion of oral sources here is dispersed across five chapters, forcing the reader to skip around different ones to gain a full understanding of them.

Barbara Cooper's article, 'Oral sources and the challenge of African history', provides the most comprehensive overview of the interpretation of oral sources and the practice of oral history. She starts by reviewing the debates on interpreting oral traditions (pp. 193–8), before turning her attention to recent studies of oral sources more generally as essentially poetic and performative:

Tradition then becomes not fixed formulas or forms but rather a longstanding processual practice of invention drawing on existing images and forms of

⁷ For an extended discussion of the perils of such circular reasoning, see Manfred Eggert, 'The Bantu problem and African archaeology', in Stahl (ed.), *African Archaeology*, 301–26.

⁸ For two examples, see Spear, 'Early Swahili history', 271–5, and Jan Vansina, 'Linguistic evidence for the introduction of ironworking into Bantu-speaking Africa', *History in Africa*, 33 (2006).

expression to create a present and future self that is imbued with meaning precisely because the past is immanent with it. The past thus both constrains and enables the present (p. 203).

From there, Cooper turns to her own experiences of fieldwork in Niger, where she learned to avoid directed questions in favor of open ended ones that allowed interview subjects to respond discursively. While this often resulted in subjects pursuing their own agendas at the expense of her own, she gained new perspectives and a greater understanding of local knowledge and epistemology. Oral evidence thus comes 'with the metaphysics included', in Vail and White's words, providing important insights into intellectual as well as social, economic and political history (pp. 198–212).⁹

Diedre Bádéjo then picks up Cooper's discussion of the significance of local knowledge gained through oral sources in her article on Yorùbá oral historiography and aesthetics. Bádéjo's is an important call for us to center our historical practice, along with our subject, in local knowledge and epistemology:

our bicultural methodology for understanding (*ìgbèèdè*) the interdependence of Yorùbá orature and historiography involves knowing that orature as they themselves know, interpret and discern value from it, that is by asserting its complex, artistic, literary, and language traditions as key signifiers of that tradition. To do so, we center our approach in the middle of a Yorùbá cultural lens to gaze upon a world created by a Yorùbá dialectic engaged in its own sensibilities and meaning (p. 358).

Echoing Cooper's emphasis on performance and poetry, she continues that orature itself is a multi-media and multi-sensory Yorùbá cultural delivery system which interweaves verbal and visual arts with political memory and religious history in order to mediate socio-cultural and political-religious behavior ... [that] is artistic, informative, and historical ... [T]o unravel and reconstruct Yorùbá orature and historiography is to listen, interpret, engage, and surrender to a multi-sensory tapestry of 'metaphoric allusions' (pp. 361–2).

The problem of understanding such metaphoric allusions is taken up by Donatien Dibwe dia Mwembu in his article on 'History and memory'. Observing that certain images, such as whipping, reverberate through Congolese history, Dibwe dia Mwembu explores how current conditions pattern and transform memories of past events. To understand their changing meanings, then, we must

⁹ On collecting and using oral data generally, see Joseph Miller (ed.), *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone, 1980); Paul Irwin, *Liptako Speaks: History from Oral Tradition in Africa* (Princeton, 1981); David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London, 1982); Claude-Hélène Perrot (ed.), *Sources orales de l'histoire de l'Afrique* (Paris, 1982); Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, 1985); Karin Barber and P. F. de Moraes Farias (eds.), *Discourse and its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (Birmingham, 1989); Leroy Vail and Landeg White, *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History* (Charlottesville VA, 1991); Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, *The Oral History Reader* (London, 1998); David Cohen *et al.* (eds.), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington, 2001); and the journals *Oral Tradition*, *Oral History*, *Oral History Review* and *International Journal of Oral History*.

understand the full field of such references, uncovering their metaphysical meanings in the process.¹⁰

Two articles then take us back to Cooper's discussion of the practice of oral history. David Henige discusses many of the problems of collecting traditions, including the use of individual or group interviews, the decision to learn local languages or use interpreters, the ethics of interviewing, potential feedback from written sources, means of recording and depositing of interview data and chronology. In doing so, Henige reminds us of the degree to which interviews are ephemeral phenomena, varying according to the historical interests and questions of the interviewer; the knowledge, willingness and performance of the interviewee(s); the relations between the two and the historical contexts, such that they are impossible to replicate. Rather, they are unique events that we must document fully if they are to be of any lasting value. And, interestingly, only Henige mentions the inherent difficulties of establishing chronology, the *sine qua non* of history, from oral sources.¹¹

Finally, Kathleen Sheldon reminds us of the crucial roles oral and life histories have played in the development of the fields of women's and gender history. Expanding on Cooper's earlier discussion, she provides an exemplary discussion of the changing themes and applications of oral sources to evolving issues of the field.

BIOLOGICAL SOURCES

Moving from the field to the lab, two articles survey biological sources for reconstructing African population history and flora and fauna. In 'Physical anthropology and African history' Shomarka Omar Y. Keita discusses some of the ways human remains provide evidence for diet (through the study of tooth wear or the chemical composition of bone), disease (tooth enamel or of bone lesions, deformations and deficiencies) and cultural practices (tooth filing or craniofacial deformation). He also stresses the potential contributions of genetics to our understanding of the enormous depth and diversity of human history in Africa while simultaneously warning of the pernicious consequences of racial thinking. Physical traits, he warns, vary independently of social, cultural or linguistic ones, reinforcing the necessity of treating biological, linguistic and cultural data as independent variables, but this is commonly disregarded in the increasingly popular marketing of DNA tests to ascertain ethnic roots. Given such unresolved problems as inadequate sample sizes, the substantially greater time depths of African data compared to Eurasian data and the high levels of recurrent mutation at high time depths, accounting for gene flows or the founder effect, and disparate results from mtDNA and Y chromosome data, one must remain skeptical of genetically based interpretations.¹²

¹⁰ For two recent studies of memory, see Jennifer Cole, *Forget Colonialism? Sacrifice and the Art of Memory in Madagascar* (Berkeley, 2001), and Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago, 2002).

¹¹ See, e.g., David Henige *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera* (Oxford, 1974); Gordon Gibson, 'Himba Epochs', *History in Africa*, 4 (1977), 67–121; and Jay Spaulding, 'The chronology of Sudanese Arabic genealogical tradition', *History in Africa*, 27 (2000), 325–37.

¹² On physical anthropology, see Jean Hiernaux, *The People of Africa* (London, 1974), and Peter Rosa, 'Physical anthropology and the reconstruction of recent precolonial history in Africa', *History in Africa*, 12 (1985), 281–305, and 14 (1987), 229–56. For a path breaking genetic study of 'Bantu migrations', Antonio Salas *et al.*, 'The making of the African mtDNA landscape', *American Journal of Human Genetics*, 71 (2002), 1082–1111.

Dorothea Bedigian then provides an overview of botanical sources for the domestication of plants and resultant origins of agriculture in Africa, including seeds, pollen and phytoliths obtained from archaeological sites or cores; collections in herbariums and research institutes; linguistic analysis and travelers' accounts, ethnographies and colonial documents.¹³

ART, ART HISTORY AND VISUAL CULTURE

Henry Drewal's article, 'Signs of time, shapes of thought: the contribution of art history and visual culture to historical methods in Africa', achieves a rare fusion between the two main parts of the book in discussing the contributions of both art itself and the fields of art history and visual culture studies as sources for history. Taking art first, Drewal sees art 'as a visual document of a creative process shaped by historical and cultural circumstances' (p. 330). Art thus serves as a potential source for both history and culture, while art history and visual culture studies are approaches to the study of art employing stylistic, cultural and historical analysis, such that 'an analysis of style changes or continuities in a series of objects arranged chronologically can reveal the dynamics and impact of historical forces in specific eras/areas' (p. 331). Thus Paula Girshick Ben-Amos's insightful study of *The Art of Benin* demonstrates the changing forms and meanings of royal art in the context of the socio-economic, cultural, institutional and political forces of the time.¹⁴ Similarly, studies of South African rock art have elucidated both material and symbolic elements in San culture.¹⁵ Art thus serves as both a product and a source of history, illuminating the ideas and institutions of the past as it is illuminated by them.

Like historians, art historians focus on texts to construct narratives of cause and effect. Yet art places its own demands on historians, demanding they acquire visual literacy to read the ideas, attitudes, emotions and concepts embedded in objects. Anthropology has been crucial to this study, but since much anthropology has been framed in the ethnographic present, much of African art history has been paradoxically synchronic, insensitive to the continuities and transformations from the 'traditional' to the 'modern'.¹⁶ Yet Drewal also points to the study of the African diaspora, discussed below, in which art and art history have served as some of the most important sources delineating the complex ways in which African ideas shaped and were shaped by Africans' encounters in slavery, resulting in a dynamic on-going historical tradition of African/American artistic production throughout the Americas.

DOCUMENTARY AND WRITTEN SOURCES

So intent have Africanists been to explore new and unfamiliar sources for pre-colonial African history that we have frequently neglected documentary sources, dismissing them as too few or too biased to be useful. Yet faced with similar conditions, medieval historians, for example, have developed detailed techniques

¹³ On the domestication of plants and animals in Africa, see Katharina Neumann, 'Romance of farming: plant cultivation and domestication in Africa', and Diane Gifford-Gonzales, 'Pastoralism and its consequences', both in Stahl (ed.), *African Archaeology*, 249-75 and 187-224. On linguistic sources for the origins and spread of plants, Gerda Rossel, *Taxonomic-Linguistic Study of Plantain in Africa* (Leiden, 1998).

¹⁴ Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, *The Art of Benin* (London, 1995).

¹⁵ J. David Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing: Symbolic Meanings in Southern San Rock Paintings* (Cambridge, 1981).

¹⁶ On the study of the history of art and art history, see Jan Vansina, *Art History in Africa* (London, 1984).

of source criticism to extract meaningful data from sparse sources. It is thus significant that documentary sources are covered here in three different articles.

John Hunwick opens with a general discussion of published and archival Arabic sources, providing extensive references to collections, bibliographies and archival guides for them. Yet there is little guidance given here for the critical evaluation of such sources, and Moraes Farias's monumental work on epigraphic sources is not mentioned.¹⁷

Similarly, John Thornton's brief discussion of early European documentary sources delineates a range of written accounts by European travelers, traders and missionaries (including a few by Africans) but provides little in the way of source criticism. But such published and archival sources make severe demands on the historian. While some were written by people knowledgeable in the languages, peoples and areas they wrote about, many were written by transients or were copies, successive editions or translations of earlier works, making it vital that historians examine them critically, making sure to seek out the few good critical editions available.¹⁸

Finally, Toyin Falola discusses mission and colonial documents, detailing a variety of such sources for Nigeria and briefly assessing their biases and limitations. Most significant were the number of European authors in Nigeria who were deeply implicated in the peoples and issues they wrote about, drawing on the same African allies to rule and gather information, but we learn little more about the problems of assessing and using such sources.¹⁹ Yet we must employ the same critical methods for evaluating and using colonial sources as precolonial ones, as well as also employing many of the other sources discussed here if we are to gain an appreciation for local understandings and perspectives on the events at hand. Thus, studying the colonial (or postcolonial) period poses many of the same source problems as precolonial history, and one must be able to read the 'colonial archive' critically and creatively to understand the long-term continuities, disruptions and transformations through and following the colonial period.²⁰

¹⁷ P. F. de Moraes Farias (ed.), *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: Epigraphy, Chronicles and Songhay-Tuareg History* (Oxford, 2003). For an insightful discussion of the relation between Islamic Arabic sources and African Islamic history, see Sean Hanratta, 'Muslim histories, African societies: the venture of Islamic studies in Africa', *JAH*, 46 (2005), 479–91.

¹⁸ On sources, see J. D. Fage, *Guide to Original Sources for Pre-colonial Western Africa Published in European Languages* (Madison, 1994); on source criticism, see Adam Jones and Beatrix Heintze (eds.), 'European sources for sub-Saharan Africa before 1900', special issue of *Paideuma*, 33 (1987); and on critical editions, Adam Jones, *Raw, Medium, Well-Done: A Critical Review of Editorial and Quasi-editorial Work on Pre-1855 Sources for Sub-Saharan Africa, 1960–1986* (Madison, 1987). Notable critical editions include, P. E. H. Hair et al. (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa 1678–1712* (London, 1992), and Adam Jones and Peter Sebald (eds.), *An African Family Archive: The Lawsons of Little Popo/Aneho (Togo) 1841–1938* (Oxford, 2005).

¹⁹ On mission sources, see Ray Jenkins, 'Impeachable source? On the use of the second edition of Reindorf's *History* as a primary source for the study of Ghanaian history', *History in Africa*, 4 (1977), 123–47, 5 (1978), 81–99.

²⁰ Notable examples of such work include Steven Feierman, *Peasant Intellectuals: Anthropology and History in Tanzania* (Madison, 1990); John Lonsdale, 'The moral economy of Mau Mau: wealth, poverty and civic virtue in Kikuyu political thought', in Bruce Berman and John Lonsdale, *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa* (London, 1992), 315–504; Thomas Spear, *Mountain Farmers: Moral Economies of Land and Agricultural Development in Arusha and Meru* (Oxford, 1997); John Parker, *Making the Town: Ga State and Society in Early Colonial Accra* (Portsmouth NH, 2000); Sandra Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter: A History of Meaning and Memory in*

While these studies all do a good job in stressing the range and importance of documentary sources, they fall short on discussing appropriate strategies for reading them critically. And none mention maps, photographs or drawings, important documentary sources that are often found in published volumes and archives and have received extensive source criticism.²¹

ETHNOGRAPHY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

A more significant omission, however, is that of ethnographic and anthropological sources, among the most abundant written sources we have and critical for understanding African social, religious and political practice as well as for interpreting archaeological and linguistic data, as noted above. Many ethnographies are themselves historical documents, written by missionaries, colonial officers or government anthropologists intent on understanding the societies in which they lived and worked.²² Such writers had their own interests and shared the cultural biases and anthropological perspectives of their day, all of which need to be carefully assessed by historians. But writers also participated in the development of anthropology as a discipline, taking courses at Oxford, London, Paris and Berlin; employing the popular guidelines to ethnographic practice, such as *Notes and Queries in Anthropology*; and contributing to the literature, making the amateur anthropologist a ubiquitous trope in colonial Africa.²³

Anthropology and ethnographic practice in Africa thus advanced hand in hand, but professional academic and government anthropologists soon supplanted the amateurs and came to dominate the study of Africa, making it imperative that historians be as aware of the anthropological paradigms emerging from the universities as of the particulars of local ethnographic production.²⁴ Recently, historians and anthropologists have also gained access to the field notes of anthropologists, opening up ethnographic practice itself to historical and

Ghana (Bloomington, 2002); Derek Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of the Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth NH, 2004); and Stephen Ellis and Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (New York, 2004).

²¹ On maps, see René Baesjou, 'The historical evidence in old maps and charts of Africa with special reference to West Africa', *History in Africa*, 15 (1988), 1–83. On photographs, Christraud Geary, 'Photographs as materials for African history', *History in Africa*, 13 (1986), 89–116; Christraud Geary, *Images from Bamum* (Washington, 1988); Christraud Geary (ed.), special issue of *African Arts*, 24 (1991); Nicolas Monti (ed.), *Africa Then: Photographs, 1840–1918* (New York, 1987); Andrew Roberts (ed.), *Photographs as Sources for African History* (London, 1988); and 'Photographs and Modernities in Africa', *Visual Anthropology*, 14/3 (2001).

²² Many also produced grammars and vocabularies of local languages, which are also valuable sources for historical as well as linguistic studies, as noted above.

²³ Jan Vansina, 'The ethnographic account as a genre in Central Africa', *Paideuma*, 33 (1987), 433–44.

²⁴ On the development of British social anthropology, e.g., see Adam Kuper, *Anthropologists and Anthropology: The British School, 1922–72* (Harmondsworth, 1973), and Sally Falk Moore, *Anthropology and Africa: Changing Perspectives on a Changing Scene* (Charlottesville, 1994), in addition to the classical texts, such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford, 1940). A survey of the voluminous literature on the Nuer introduces the major schools that followed. Alice Conklin, Sara Pugach and Andrew Zimmerman are currently undertaking studies of the development of French and German anthropology.

anthropological inquiry.²⁵ And ethnographic history has been supplemented by historical ethnography that builds on the ethnographic archive and seeks to supplant the static anthropological models long bemoaned by historians with historicized models that explore cultural change through time.²⁶

GEOGRAPHY, CLIMATOLOGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Another significant omission is any discussion of geography, climatology and environmental history, all areas where there is considerable scholarly activity. Geography is crucial for understanding the geological, climatic, hydrological and environmental conditions within which Africans have acted. Such conditions have never been static, but have co-varied in relation with human activity and each other. A dramatic case in point is the climatic changes that led to the desiccation of the Sahara, the movement of human populations and the development of pastoralism and agriculture some 6,000 years ago. Historical climates and environments can be reconstructed from such diverse sources as settlement sites, cores extracted from glaciers and the earth and water levels recorded for the Nile, together with related changes in flora and fauna.²⁷ Yet ecological systems are very complex, and care must be taken not to assume linear patterns of change in either the environment or peoples' relation to it.²⁸

HEALTH, DISEASE, FAMINE AND DEMOGRAPHY

Another neglected area is health and related fields. The concept of health underlies fundamental social, political and intellectual processes in African societies and constitutes an increasingly important field for study.²⁹ In addition, there are now excellent studies of the epidemiology and impact of such diseases as cholera, smallpox, bovine pleuropneumonia, rinderpest, trypanosomiasis and East Coast Fever that accompanied the expansion of trade and colonialism from the later nineteenth century, studies that have now become critical in our understanding of colonial conquest and rule.³⁰ Scholars have also explored the complex

²⁵ See, e.g., Lyn Schumaker, *Africanizing Anthropology: Fieldwork, Networks and the Making of Cultural Knowledge in Central Africa* (Durham NC, 2001).

²⁶ For an example of recent historical ethnography and a notable addition to the Nuer canon, see Sharon Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State* (Berkeley, 1996).

²⁷ Sharon Nicolson, 'The methodology of historical climate reconstruction and its application to Africa', *JAH*, 20 (1979), 31-49; David Schoenbrun, 'Treating an interdisciplinary allergy: methodological approaches to pollen studies for the historian of Early Africa', *History in Africa*, 18 (1991), 323-48; Peter Robertshaw and David Taylor, 'Climate change and the rise of political complexity in Western Uganda', *JAH*, 41 (2000), 1-28; George Brooks, *Landlords and Stranger: Ecology, Society, and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630* (Boulder, 1993); and Schoenbrun, *A Green Place*.

²⁸ James Fairhead and Melissa Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape: Society and Ecology in a Forest-Savanna Mosaic* (Cambridge, 1996), and James McCann, *Green Land, Brown Land, Black Land: An Environmental History of Africa, 1800-1990* (Portsmouth NH, 1999).

²⁹ Steven Feierman and John Janzen (eds.), *The Social Basis of Health and Healing in Africa* (Berkeley, 1992).

³⁰ For two notable epidemiological studies, see John Ford, *The Role of the Trypanosomiasis in African Ecology* (Oxford, 1971), and James Giblin, 'Trypanosomiasis control in African history', *JAH*, 31 (1990), 59-80. On disease, Randall Packard, *White Plague, Black Labor: Tuberculosis and the Political Economy of Health and Disease in South*

socio-political, economic and environmental processes that lead to famine.³¹ And the historical demography of the slave trade has become a major academic industry following Philip Curtin's pioneering *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census*, based on a meticulous study of ship manifests and commercial records.³²

HISTORICAL GENRES

The remaining articles in *Writing African History* focus on historical genres rather than on sources and methods. Masao Yoshida provides a brief overview of some of the themes and sources of evidence for African economic history, but he neglects to discuss significant methodological innovations in African economic history, as historians have struggled with recalcitrant quantitative and qualitative sources, sought to adapt economic theory to African conditions, and drawn from anthropology and political science to devise relevant models.³³

Citing the degree to which many smaller communities have been neglected or maligned in the histories of their larger neighbors, Bala Achi appeals for the production of local histories researched and written by the communities themselves. Yet locally produced histories have been a feature of African historiography since the early days of mission presses and indirect rule, and he neglects to discuss the problems inherent in such accounts or how those writing them can overcome local interests and prejudices to produce critical histories, both of which emerge in his story of the production of one such history related here.

Similarly, William Martin mounts an appeal for world-systems analysis in spite of the reasons for its demise, which he details here, and his approach is more

Africa (Berkeley, 1989); Maryinez Lyons, *The Colonial Disease: A Social History of Sleeping Sickness in Northern Zaire, 1900-1940* (Cambridge, 1992); and Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham NC, 1999).

³¹ See, e.g., James McCann, *From Poverty to Famine in Northeastern Ethiopia: A Rural History, 1900-1935* (Philadelphia, 1987), and James Giblin, *The Politics of Environmental Control in Northeastern Tanzania, 1840-1940* (Philadelphia, 1992).

³² On the slave trade, see Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969); Paul Lovejoy, 'The impact of the Atlantic slave trade on Africa: a review of the literature', *JAH*, 30 (1989), 365-94; and Joseph Miller, *Slavery and Slaving in World History: A Bibliography* (2 vols.) (Armonk NY, 1998), as updated periodically in *Slavery and Abolition*. On historical demography generally, Dennis Cordell and Joel Gregory (eds.), *African Population and Capitalism: Historical Perspectives* (2nd edn., Madison, 1994); Bruce Fetter (ed.), *Demography from Scanty Evidence: Central Africa in the Colonial Era* (Boulder, 1990); and Dennis Cordell, 'African historical demography in the years since Edinburgh', *History in Africa*, 27 (2000), 61-89.

³³ For examples of the application of economic data and theory, see Robin Law, 'Posthumous questions for Karl Polanyi: price inflation in pre-colonial Dahomey', *JAH*, 33 (1992), 387-420, and A. G. Hopkins, 'Innovation in a colonial context: African origins of the Nigerian cocoa-farming industry, 1880-1920', in C. Dewey and A. G. Hopkins (eds.), *The Imperial Impact* (London, 1978), 83-96, 341-2. For the use of quantitative and qualitative sources, Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson, 'Trust, pawnship, and Atlantic history: the institutional foundations of the Old Calabar slave trade', *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), 333-55, and Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson, 'This horrid hole: royal authority, commerce and credit at Bonny 1600-1840', *JAH*, 45 (2004), 363-92. For theoretical approaches, Elias Mandala's 'Capitalism, kinship and gender in the Lower Tchiri (Shire) valley of Malawi, 1860-1960: an alternative theoretical framework', *African Economic History*, 13 (1984), 137-69. And for a recent text, Charles Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination and Development* (Cambridge, 2005).

sociological than historical.³⁴ Finally, Isaac Olawale Albert's offers a distinctly idiosyncratic approach to social history. Defining social history as exclusively the sociological study of social problems, which he criticizes as virtually non-existent, he ignores the explosion of more conventionally defined social history over the past thirty years – including histories of women (as discussed by Sheldon here), slavery and emancipation, labor, urbanization, ethnicity, alcohol, leisure, sport, disease and youth – and he neglects even to mention the influential series of ACLS/SSRC 'state of the art' papers, many of which concerned social history,³⁵ or the most distinguished historical series of the period, the *Social History of Africa*, edited by Allen Isaacman, Luise White, Jean Hay and Jean Allman.

THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

The study of African history has expanded dramatically over the past twenty-five years to include that of the African diaspora, the subject of Joseph Holloway's article, "What Africa has given": African continuities in the North American diaspora', but, strangely, his contribution fails to take account of this work, much of which exploits the methods discussed here to excellent advantage. The restriction to North America is problematic at the outset, ignoring the much richer literature on African/American religion, life and art that exists for the Caribbean and Latin America together with the theoretical and methodological advances they have engendered. So too is Holloway's emphasis on Melville Herskovits's concept of 'retentions', but such a static approach to the transmission of African culture needs to be historicized in order to convey the dynamics of African cultural transmissions and responses to slavery as specific Africans with their own particular beliefs and practices struggled to understand and combat the historical conditions in which they were forced to live.³⁶

³⁴ Nevertheless, for an interesting historical study employing world-systems theory, see Donald Wright, *The World and a Very Small Place: A History of Globalization in Niimi* (2nd edn., Armonk NY, 2004).

³⁵ The American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council jointly commissioned a series of 'state of the art' papers by leading historians and other scholars between 1981 and 1991 that were first presented at the annual meetings of the African Studies Association and subsequently published in *African Studies Review*. Notable examples include Frederick Cooper, 'Africa and the world economy', *ASR*, 24 (1981), 1–86; Jane Guyer, 'Household and community in African studies', *ASR*, 24 (1981), 87–137; John Lonsdale, 'States and social processes in Africa: a historiographical survey', *ASR*, 24 (1981), 139–225; Bill Freund, 'Labor and labor history in Africa: a review of the literature', *ASR*, 27 (1984), 1–58; Sara Berry, 'The food crisis and agrarian change in Africa', *ASR*, 27 (1984), 59–112; Harold Scheub, 'A review of African oral traditions and literature', *ASR*, 28 (1985), 1–72; Steven Feierman, 'Struggles for control: the social roots of health and healing in modern Africa', *ASR*, 28 (1985), 73–147; Terence Ranger, 'Religious movements and politics in sub-Saharan Africa', *ASR*, 29 (1986), 1–69; Bogumil Jewsiewicki, 'African historical studies: academic knowledge as "usable past" and radical scholarship', *ASR*, 32 (1989), 1–76; Allen Isaacman, 'Peasants and rural social protest in Africa', *ASR*, 33 (1990), 1–120; and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, 'The process of urbanization in Africa (from the origins to the beginning of independence)', *ASR*, 34 (1991), 1–98.

³⁶ On approaches, see Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (Oxford, 1978), 43–92; Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture* (2nd edn., Boston MA, 1992); Emmanuel Akyeampong, 'Africans in the diaspora: the diaspora in Africa',

Numerous studies of African/American religions have demonstrated the complex ways that Africans employed their own religious beliefs and practices to comprehend themselves, other Africans and Christianity throughout the diaspora. In the Caribbean and Brazil, Yorùbá and Kongo-derived religions were ubiquitous, while African religions made a strong impact on Christianity everywhere. Even in those cases where African/Americans were unable to practice their own religious beliefs, fundamental African religious ideas regarding spiritual forces continued to inform their thinking, beliefs and practices.³⁷

Similar cultural forces were operative in art and music, where African/Americans were frequently prevented from producing their own artistic and musical forms but continued to draw on their own aesthetic principles to create new ones. In the case of pottery, for example, Senegalese potters brought to South Carolina were taught to produce wheel-thrown, glazed pottery instead of the unglazed coiled pottery they had made at home. Yet their new work continued to be informed by the same abstract, geometrical and asymmetrical aesthetic principles that had long characterized their work, and a similar phenomenon can be seen in the work of African/American weavers and quilters.³⁸

Due to the now extensive demographic studies of the slave trade, detailing the origins, ethnic compositions and destinations of different groups of Africans, noted above, historians are now able to trace the movement of specific cultural groups into particular geographic areas at specific times in order to understand their cultural impact and explore how polyglot African communities became transformed into new ones in the context of slavery and emancipation.³⁹ In the process, study of the diaspora has now become one of the most dynamic fields in the development of new methods and approaches to African history, is now expanding into the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds and is exerting significant influence on historical studies within Africa as well.

African Affairs, 99 (2000), 183–215; and Patrick Manning, 'Africa and the African diaspora: new directions of study', *JAH*, 44 (2003), 487–506.

³⁷ See, e.g., Raboteau, *Slave Religion*; George Brandon, *Santeria from Africa to the New World* (Bloomington, 1993); Sandra Barnes (ed.), *Africa's Ogun; Old World and New* (2nd edn., Bloomington, 1997); Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill NC, 1998).

³⁸ On art, see Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, 1981), and Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York, 1984); on pottery and quilts, John Vlatch, *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Athens GA, 1990); on music, John Roberts, *Black Music of Two Worlds* (New York, 1974); on folklore: Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: African-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford, 1978).

³⁹ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, 1992); Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge LA, 1992); Kristin Mann and Edna Bay (eds.), *The Making of a Black Atlantic World in the Bight of Benin and Brazil* (London, 2001); Judith Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, 2001); James Sweet, *Recreating Africa: Culture, Kinship, and Religion in the African-Portuguese World, 1441–1770* (Chapel Hill NC, 2003); Michael Gomez, *Exchanging our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill NC, 1998); and Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Slavery and African Ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the Links* (Chapel Hill NC, 2005).

In conclusion, the central message of *Writing African History*, that historians need to become literate in the sources and disciplines they seek to use in order to be able critically to evaluate them, is a crucial one. While several of the articles do an excellent job in conveying such literacy, however, many do not, and the volume as a whole lacks the overall vision, clarity and coherence of McCall's pioneering text. Perhaps such a multi-authored work should not be expected to achieve the coherence of a single author, but individual contributions should reflect a common editorial vision and engage one another. This does not happen here, and *Writing African History* is thus more likely to become a reference that one dips into selectively than one used in the classroom or taken to the field. Such is unlikely in any case unless the publishers can be persuaded to produce a paperback edition at reasonable cost.