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## Writing African History

Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia  
Montclair State University, brizuelagare@mail.montclair.edu

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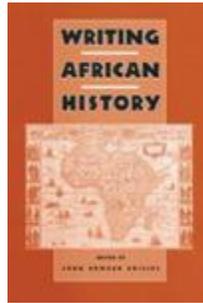
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## Book Review



### H-NET BOOK REVIEW

Published by H-Africa, <http://www.h-net.org/~africa/> (December, 2005).

John Edward Phillips, ed. *Writing African History*. Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005. xii + 532 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 1-58046-164-6.

Reviewed for H-Africa by Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia, History Department, Montclair State University.

### *African History: Sources, Methods, and Approaches*

Forty years after the publication of Daniel McCall's *Africa in Time Perspective: A Discussion of Historical Reconstruction from Unwritten Sources*, John Edward Phillips and a team of experts in different fields have produced *Writing African History*. This collection of essays is an attempt to update McCall's earlier work, acknowledging that African history and the disciplines that support its production have changed significantly in the last four decades. In general, the book is quite successful in presenting a comprehensive, yet not exhaustive, overview of some of the methods and sources employed by historians of Africa. It is prefaced with an introduction written by Daniel McCall wherein McCall describes the content and scope of the collected essays and places them in their historiographical context.

The body of the book is divided into four parts. The first part contains only one essay written by the editor -- Phillips -- introducing the question, "what is African history?" The majority of the text, however, is devoted to the more general question of what is history. Professional historians and advanced graduate students will find little new in this piece, but undergraduates and readers less familiar with the history as a discipline may find it useful.

The essays contained in the second part describe and explain the sources employed by historians in the writing of African history. The authors of these essays look not just at the sources but also at the diverse disciplines and methods that produce these materials. Here, the reader will find contributions that discuss the data coming from archaeology, historical linguistics, physical anthropology, and botany; as well as discussions on the collection and use of oral traditions and oral history, Arabic sources, and various types of European documents.

Some of these essays present an overview of the disciplines that produce particular kinds of data. For instance, in "Archaeology and the Reconstruction of the African Past", Susan Keech McIntosh presents a very useful description of the changes that have affected the discipline of archaeology as it pertains to Africa. This is followed by a clear and thoughtful explanation of the methods and concepts used by archaeologists, particularly notions of chronology and association. The objective of the author is to show historians that the valid use of archaeological data requires proper understanding of the ways in which that data has been produced. She also makes valuable suggestions about how historians can make better use of archaeological materials. For example, she proposes a number of questions that historians should consider when assessing archaeological evidence: have "recovery methods . . . been designed to detect and evaluate distortions of pre- and post-depositional processes? Has due attention been paid to questions of chronology and contemporaneity? Where analytical groupings are created have they been defined and inclusion criteria specified so that we may assess whether the entities created are indeed groups of individual things that can be fairly discussed together" (p. 63)? Using early iron technology research in the Termit region of Niger as a case study, she reminds us that a problem with radiocarbon testing is that it does not document an archeological event. Thus radiocarbon-acquired dates need to be linked, through other techniques (such as stratigraphy and association), to specific archaeological events. McIntosh acknowledges it can be hard-going sometimes, but "if you have begun to understand the material domain of time, you have the basic knowledge to evaluate the strength of an archaeological argument" and your history will be stronger for it (p. 80).

The essays on linguistics and physical anthropology, by Christopher Ehret and S. O. Y. Keita respectively, make similar presentations on those particular disciplines and are similarly effective. Ehret takes the reader step by step through the process of creating a linguistic stratigraphy that will uncover the "genetic" relationships between languages. He then continues to explain how words within specific languages become the "artifacts" for the historian. By following specific criteria on how to position particular words in the linguistic stratigraphy the historian may start to unveil stories of contact and exchange among different societies. He ends by using the history of the Nilo-Saharan family of African languages to illustrate these techniques.

S. O. Y. Keita focuses on skeletal biology, the area he thinks is most likely to make important contributions to African history. In his view, this sub-area will help the historian develop knowledge of what he calls lifeways, health and disease states, and population affinity and relationships. While acknowledging the limits of studying skeletal biology -- related to the availability and quality of samples and the challenges this poses for establishing a reliable periodization -- Keita describes, in great detail, the possibilities. Bones get imprinted with all kind of information about diet and activity, health and disease; by exploiting the insights offered by palaeopathology -- which have contributed greatly to historical debates on the origins of syphilis in the Americas and in the study of Egyptian and Peruvian mummies -- historians will be able to better grasp issues of human variation and population history. He discusses at length the history and development of the concept of race and the racial paradigm in the understanding of Africa's population, concluding that "race" is of no use in understanding the history of Africa's populations.

Instead, he argues that, "the spatial patterning of DNA and serogenetic variant in living populations requires the use of evolutionary models and other considerations to infer the casual reasons for their distribution" (p. 144).

This section also includes two essays on oral sources, reflecting the importance of oral materials in the writing of African history. It also shows, however, that there are still many unresolved questions regarding the place of oral materials in the writing of history, and which historians must pay attention to. In "Oral Traditions as a Means of Reconstructing the Past," David Henige makes a strong case for the changes that need to take place to enhance and validate the collection and use of oral traditions by historians. Henige presents a clear-eyed description of the many problems that plague the practices of historians when it comes to the use of oral materials. He notes, in particular, the difficulty accessing materials collected by historians: "From the beginning, Africanist historians took to the field with notebooks and tape recorders, used them furiously -- or so we were to gather -- and wrote articles and books based on them. These contained a panoply of citations to interviews -- names, identifications, dates, places, sometimes even references to complex alphanumeric classification systems. And then nothing. Perhaps no more than 10 percent of the cases were the notebooks and/or field tapes deposited anywhere else than the historian's basement, attic, or office, despite the establishment of several depositories for this purpose" (p. 173). His assessment may be interpreted as yet another attack on the validity of oral sources, illustrating as it does a situation in which the materials in question cannot be used by other historians and thus, cannot be verified or challenged. However, his suggestions are pertinent and historians will do well in paying close attention to them. He proposes, for example, that given the limited opportunities to revisit oral data, more precautions should be taken at the time of collection. He explores issues that affect the value of oral sources such as miscommunication with informants, intercultural barriers, exploitative practices in the field, the performative nature of oral traditions, time limitations, and interference between the oral and the written. He concludes that: "To become fully operational, the use of oral data must encompass at least the deposit of raw materials with limited or no restriction on their use; accompanying details of interviewing and collecting techniques; and a full list of informants and formal questions. Until this happens, at a minimum, oral data cannot be regarded as full-fledged historical sources and can be disregarded without further ado" (p. 188).

Barbara Cooper's essay examines the broad debates that have shaped the development of oral history and its use among historians of Africa. She focuses on the centrality of oral materials in the definition and evolution of African history as a discipline. However, she also acknowledges that this emphasis has created a sense of isolation from the general field of history. Thus, despite the rich and exciting developments within African history, "the reality is that the methodological and conceptual challenges produced by African history have rendered it largely unintelligible to academic historians in general" (p. 211). She makes an important call to find ways of bridging this gap in a manner that allows African history to continue developing its own methods without sacrificing its ability to establish constructive dialogues with other fields. "The way out, I suggest, is to recast somewhat our sense of audience and become more self-conscious about the multitude of discourses about Africa that shape how our work is received" (p. 211).

**I was very pleased to find that the discussion of interdisciplinary and oral sources does not exclude the examination of written ones. After all, these are just as important for the writing of African history and, in many cases, equally problematic. Essays on Arab and European sources by John Hunwick, John Thornton, and Toyin Falola close the third part of the book. Here, the authors present an inventory of available materials, a reflection on their potential, and a consideration of the problems they pose for historians attempting to interpret their significance.**

**This aforementioned third part of the book is devoted to discussing, describing and illustrating some of the approaches used in the writing of African history. Here the reader will find pieces on social history, economic history, art history, oral history, local history, world-systems analysis, Africans in the diaspora, history and memory, and women's history.**

**One is tempted to focus on the absence of valuable areas of study such as environmental or intellectual history. However, the volume does not pretend to be exhaustive and it would be unfair to expect it to cover all approaches to African history. Rather, these essays offer the reader a valuable sample of some of the approaches that have been put to good, productive use by historians of Africa.**

**Reading these essays, one appreciates how rich and diverse the field of African history has become. However, it is also evident that separately defining and delimiting all these areas of study is difficult and largely artificial. There is considerable overlap in theory and practice and the differences among them should always be seen as methodological shortcuts and not necessarily reflections of reality.**

**Each chapter uses a different strategy to illustrate the methods, objectives, benefits, and shortcomings of the historical approaches considered. Some present a straightforward description and discussion of particular areas of study. Such is the case with the essays on economic history, art history, and women's history. These articles carefully trace the evolution of these perspectives in the writing of African history and assess their achievements, challenges, and future potential.**

**Other authors choose to address head on the questions of definition and purpose of specific perspectives. Such is the case in the essay by Isaac Olawale Albert, "Data Collection and Interpretation in the Social History of Africa." Here the author explores the definition of social history and presents a critical examination of the work that has been produced in this area. He argues that historians have failed to put development at the center of their study of social history, and suggests that the analysis of the many problems that presently ail many African societies should be the starting point of any significant social history in Africa. Although some may find this definition of social history rather limited, it raises important questions on the use and practice of history inside and outside Africa, and on the connections between history and society. Historians must find ways of addressing these important issues in their work and Albert's essay offers a valuable starting point.**

**Finally, some authors present specific examples of historical work to illustrate particular approaches. In this group it is worth highlighting the essay on oral history contributed by Diedre L. Bádéjo. Bádéjo describes the importance of reexamining the epistemological tools used in the interpretation of Yoruba oral materials. She encourages historians to look to the Yoruba language as the main source for the understanding of Yoruba epistemology. This, she argues, will enable them to unlock the complex and diverse messages contained in the rich Yoruba oral forms.**

**The volume closes with a conclusion by Phillips which, like McCall's introduction, is a broadly sketched piece on the different steps involved in writing a historical piece. And like McCall's introduction it will probably be only of real interest to undergraduates and younger students of history.**

**Despite the often-quoted difficulties in achieving overall quality in edited collections, it is fair to say that the essays to this book are well written, well thoughtout, and very effective in describing the sources and methods used by historians of Africa. My main complaint is the lack of a more substantive conclusion. After the rich and stimulating presentations made by the contributors to the text, it would have been valuable to present an overall reflection on the state of the field. There are also a few typos and proofreading errors that should be corrected in further editions. Overall, this is a very useful book that is not just meant to celebrate the richness of African history but to critically reflect upon it. And it manages to do both.**

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