

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 5
Issue 1 *January 1998*

Article 9

1-1-1998

A History of African Societies to 1870

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Recommended Citation

Isichei, Elizabeth (1998) "A History of African Societies to 1870," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol5/iss1/9>

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A History of African Societies to 1870

Elizabeth Isichei, 1997. *A History of African Societies to 1870*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York. x + 578 pp. Maps, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$69.95 (cloth), \$24.95 (paper).

This is a well-balanced work that reflects the current status of African historical studies. It is nuanced, and comprehensible, yet not at all simplistic in either its organization or content. Isichei presents what she calls "conversations" with differing versions of the African past, with her own voice prominent among many others (p. 3).

The work is Africa-centered, with little mention of European explorers. The Boer history in South Africa, for example, gets much less space than does the Khoisan. It is also an inclusive history, discussing "stateless" peoples who have been little studied by historians, as well as the Great States and Big Men. In this effort, she draws heavily on ethnographic literature.

Her approach is fluid. Chronologically, the book is divided into three periods: prior to 1000 CE, up to the 16th century, and finally through ca. 1870, although these dates are never absolute markers. Along the way Isichei draws forth half a dozen themes to provide focus, while at the same time the continent is subdivided into regions, although her definition of these regions is not consistent throughout.

Prominent among the themes is an emphasis on the way environment has shaped social, political, economic, and religious institutions. Drought and famine have been constants in African history and remain so. Of considerable interest the treatment of the historic interaction between gatherer-hunter, pastoral and agricultural societies: the roles of craft producers, domestic slaves, and the gender division of production are discussed in relation to political and religious power structures.