# 1 Introduction

## Elucidating the African past

International understanding of the African past has increased and improved enormously during the past one hundred, more particularly the past fifty, years. This understanding extends both throughout the continent itself and far beyond, so that Africa's contribution to the whole story of human development and achievement is coming into focus. This is a matter for celebration, not for ignorance (J. G. D. Clark 1961) or doubt and backward-looking criticism (M. Hall 2002). It is a story to which the contribution of archaeology is paramount and which needs to be told and understood both in African and in world-wide contexts (D. W. Phillipson 2003b).

This book attempts to provide an up-to-date summary and interpretation of the archaeological evidence for the past of humans in Africa from their first appearance up to the time when written history becomes the primary source of information. In chronological terms, this period covers all but a tiny fraction of the time that the earth has had human inhabitants. It now seems very probable that it was in Africa that humankind first evolved, during the period between 5.0 and 2.5 million years ago. At the other end of the time-scale, the earliest written records relating to Africa, those of the ancient Egyptians, began about 5000 years ago; for many other parts of the continent, notably the interior regions south of the equator, no such records are more than one or two centuries old.

The period of time before written history is conventionally known as prehistory. The term is not entirely appropriate in Africa, for a number of reasons. First, there were long periods, especially in the northern part of the continent, about which written records, although available, are not generally informative on many aspects of contemporary life. There are also numerous instances where the only available written records were produced by outsiders and frequently give an incomplete account of matters which the writers did not properly understand. These are situations which confront prehistorians in many parts of the world, but they give rise to particular problems in some parts of Africa because of the generally shallow time-depth of indigenous literacy. A different approach is required to those aspects of African culture which, to a very large extent, take the place of written literature in other regions. These include the developed oral traditions which, in many societies, preserve the accumulated wisdom of the

people, including details of their past history. Again, language itself plays a large part in determining a people's or an individual's sense of identity. Where written examples of ancient languages do not exist, much can be learned through the study of present-day linguistic forms and distributions concerning the nature and interactions of past populations. The methods of interpreting these sources of information about the African past will be discussed below, and an attempt made to link their evidence with that derived from archaeology.

This book offers a particularly African perspective on the continent's past. Developments elsewhere are discussed only where they are directly relevant to an understanding of African archaeology. For this reason, the most recent periods in North Africa are excluded from consideration, since at that time the regions north of the Sahara were firmly part of the Mediterranean world. Likewise, the archaeology of European colonialism in sub-Saharan Africa is omitted from the present narrative.

Africa is a vast land-mass, representing approximately one fifth of the habitable area of the globe. It is home to over 500 million people who, despite ever-increasing urbanisation, practise a great variety of economies and life-styles almost all of which are rooted in the continent's diverse environments and resources. The principal physical features of Africa are shown in the frontispiece to this volume. It is useful to visualise African environments as forming a series of roughly concentric zones, centred on the low-lying equatorial rain-forest of the Congo Basin and the West African coastlands. Around this, on the north, east and south, are belts of progressively drier country, generally at increasing altitudes, with forest merging to woodland savanna, to open grassland, to semi-desert or sahel. In the eastern part of the continent, this zoning pattern is interrupted by highlands, the Rift Valley system and its associated lakes, extending from Eritrea southward to Lesotho and South Africa. It is in this eastern region that the continent's highest mountains lie; some retain year-round snow and glaciers. In both northern and southwestern Africa are areas of true desert, where almost no rain currently falls; both are low-lying but interrupted by mountain massifs. Finally, at Africa's northern and southern extremities, along the coast of the Maghreb and around the Cape of Good Hope, are areas of Mediterranean vegetation, while parts of the east coast are fringed by mangroves.

This pattern has not, of course, remained static. Throughout the time with which this book is concerned, and continuing at the present, fluctuating temperatures and patterns of rainfall have resulted in large-scale changes in the extent and location of the environmental zones. At times, the equatorial forest has shrunk to isolated enclaves, and the deserts have expanded and become even more arid. On other occasions, the forests have been far more extensive than they are today and the deserts have almost disappeared. All

these processes have been accompanied by corresponding fluctuations in the intervening savannas. During the earlier periods of humankind's presence in Africa, earth movements in the Rift Valley continued. These changes are noted, albeit briefly, at appropriate places in the narrative which follows.

In view of the enormous time-span of African prehistory and the great variety of the human societies that have inhabited the continent, it is clear that very varied methods have to be employed in elucidating the past. Studies of linguistics and oral traditions are, of course, only applicable to relatively recent periods. For the vast majority of the period of time with which this book is concerned archaeology is our main and often our only source of primary information about human activities.

## Archaeology in Africa

Archaeological data provide a picture of the past which is essentially different from, and in many ways complementary to, that which may be reconstructed from written or oral sources. The archaeologist studying the material remains of a pre-literate people will hardly ever be able to learn the names or characters of individuals. He or she will often find it difficult to make more than very general inferences about social systems or political situations. On the other hand, the archaeologist's interpretation of technological skills and economic practices, such as hunting, agriculture or the herding of domestic animals, will generally be far more complete and reliable than that which can be obtained by other types of research. For this reason it is not just to the study of prehistory that archaeology can make an important contribution; it is also an approach that greatly aids our understanding of more recent societies, even those for which abundant written records are available.

To the student of Africa, the findings of archaeological research represent a major source of information about the continent's past; it is the principal source for most of our understanding of prehistory, and it makes a significant contribution to knowledge about more recent periods. In Africa, the shallow time-depths to which archaeological investigations may often be usefully applied greatly increase our historical perspective of recent trends and events; and it may justly be claimed that our understanding of such pressing contemporary problems as desertification and tribalism is enhanced through the results of archaeological research, with obvious implications for economic and political development (di Lernia and Palombini 2002; D. W. Phillipson 2003b). In addition, African archaeology is relevant far beyond its own continent. The archaeologists and prehistorians of other regions have much to learn from the African record, not only from its unparalleled evidence for the earliest periods of human development, but also

methodologically. Because much of Africa has undergone environmental change on a scale which is relatively minor when compared with the formerly glaciated regions of Eurasia and North America, abundant data are fairly readily available to aid the interpretation of prehistoric subsistence practices. In many parts of Africa the scale of modern development has likewise been comparatively slight. Africa also provides excellent opportunities for contrasting the testimony of archaeology with that of linguistic and oral historical studies, and for interpreting the meaning of rock art in the light of the belief systems of recent peoples, as will be discussed below.

The modern study of African archaeology has developed in two principal directions. The literate civilisations of ancient Egypt and North Africa were of interest to Graeco-Roman historians and, more recently, have been investigated through more than 200 years of changing approaches, while the prehistory of more southerly regions first received serious attention in South Africa at the end of the nineteenth century (Robertshaw 1990a). The two studies have long remained separate, and their methodologies are only now beginning to converge as is illustrated, for example, by recent investigations in Ethiopia. In the Saharan and sub-Saharan latitudes the emphasis and geographical coverage of research has always been irregular, and the archaeology of large areas still remains virtually unexplored. Of necessity, much effort has gone into demonstrating basic sequences and setting up a terminological framework for prehistory. Only fairly recently has it been practicable to present a comprehensive overview such as that attempted here, and to propose plausible explanations for the trends and developments which are detected in the archaeological record.

The classification of archaeological materials into successive phases, industries and complexes is now seen as an artificial compartmentalisation of what was usually a continuous variation, both in time and space. It must, however, be recognised that closely defined boundaries between culture areas could and did exist in certain circumstances, and that stylistic and technological change proceeded more rapidly at some times than at others. This problem is considered in greater detail below (pp. 84–6).

Contrary to assumptions frequently made in the past, it is now recognised that the parameters of material culture distributions do not necessarily coincide with those of human societies as recognised on socio-political, linguistic or other bases. Uncertainty about the significance of material culture groupings is greatest in the case of the earlier prehistoric industries, because it is only very rarely that we can understand the purposes to which particular artefacts were put. It is frequently difficult to distinguish between variation due to different functions, to stylistic traditions and preferences, or to other factors such as the availability of particular raw materials. Furthermore, a single society may engage in multiple distinct life-styles, sometimes

on a seasonal basis, perhaps in separate areas and environments: contrasting archaeological assemblages may thus represent different activities of a single community or of sub-groups within that community. On the other hand, it has also been shown that certain items or styles of material culture may fulfil a symbolic function through their association with a particular society or section of a society, as is the case, for example, with some iron-smelting furnaces (Childs 1991). Although material culture distinctions do not necessarily coincide with socio-political ones, it is equally incorrect to assume that such correlations may not, in certain circumstances, exist.

For reasons such as these, African prehistory is here presented with emphasis on economic development and general life-style (including, where practicable, socio-political systems and ideology), correspondingly less attention being paid to the definition, succession and inter-relationship of named cultures and industries. However, in the present state of African archaeological studies, the old framework needs to be partially retained. In many parts of the continent, as will be made apparent in the following chapters, concerted programmes of archaeological research have never been undertaken. There are several regions, even whole countries, where chance discoveries or isolated excavations, often poorly documented, provide the only data on which a synthesis may be based. Here, the archaeologist may only be able to propose an outline succession of industrial stages, such being an essential pre-requisite for the detailed study of ancient life-styles and resource-exploitation patterns.

An ever-increasing contribution to our understanding of the past is now being made by genetic studies, not only of past and present human populations, but also of the plants and animals on which people's livelihood has depended. The potential of such studies, and the methodologies involved, are described by M. K. Jones (2001).

In writing a concise overview of African archaeology such as that contained in this book, it has been necessary to select and, on occasion, to simplify. While some geographic areas have yielded a wide range of archaeological data, in others very little is yet available. Thus it is that in certain sections of the book almost every site that has been investigated receives mention, while elsewhere a more general picture emerges from a series of comparable investigations. As a result, major changes of emphasis and interpretation may be expected to occur as research and discovery progress. Topics which have been the subject of recent in-depth research receive comparatively detailed treatment.

In the building up of an overview of African prehistory, particular attention must be paid to erecting a sound chronological framework. Several methods are available; for details of the methodologies the reader is referred to the comprehensive survey presented by Klein (1999). Age estimates based

on radiocarbon analyses are particularly problematic, since it is only for the more recent periods that the relationship between radiocarbon and true ages is known. In this book ages are cited in the following manners in order to minimise confusion and to aid comparison between dates derived from different sources and methods.

(a) In chapters 2–5 ages are given in the form 'about . . . years ago'. These ages apply to periods beyond the last 7000 years and should all be regarded as approximations. They are derived from a variety of sources, mostly – for the last 50,000 years or so – radiocarbon, and no attempt has been made to calibrate or correct them unless otherwise stated.

(b) In chapters 6–8 dates since about 5000 BC are given in years BC or AD, these conventional designations being retained as those most widely and most readily understood. Here, radiocarbon dates have been calibrated and are expressed in calendar years according to the calculations presented by Stuiver and Kra (1986; Stuiver *et al.* 1998). At certain periods this calibration permits only approximate ages to be proposed because of variation in the radiocarbon content of the atmosphere. Precise dates such as 146 BC are derived from historical sources. All ages noted in these three chapters are thus intended to be comparable with one another, but they are not necessarily compatible with those cited in chapters 2–5.

Since more plentiful data relating to absolute chronology are now available than could be employed by the writers of previous syntheses, and in view of the evidence for disparate rates of development in different parts of the continent, this book does not employ the conventional terminology based upon broad chrono-technological subdivisions such as 'Late Stone Age', 'Neolithic' or 'Iron Age'. It has long been recognised that such terms cannot be precisely defined, but their informal use has continued, often at the expense of clarity; they are avoided in this book.

## Linguistics

Language provides an important means of classification for African populations. It has a major bearing on an individual's sense of identity and membership of a group. It also has historical validity, since people usually learn their first language from the other members of that group to which they belong by birth and/or upbringing.

There is good but by no means unanimous agreement among linguists concerning the major language families of Africa (Greenberg 1963; Heine and Nurse 2000; Fig. 1), whose present distribution is shown in outline form in Fig. 2. In the northern and northeastern regions of the continent, the languages which are spoken today belong to the super-family generally known as Afroasiatic. This includes the Berber languages of North Africa

| Family | Main divisions | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Afroasiatic | Semitic | Arabic, Amharic, Gurage, Tigrinya |
| | Berber | Berber, Tuareg |
| | Cushitic | Somali, Oromo, Afar, Sidamo, Beja |
| | Chadic | Fali, Hausa |
| Nilo-Saharan | Sudanic | Acholi, Shilluk, Mangbetu, Jie |
| | Saharan | Kanuri, Teda, Zaghawa |
| | Songhai | Songhai |
| Niger–Congo | West Atlantic | Dyola, Fulani, Temne |
| | Mande | Mwa, Mende |
| | Voltaic | Dogon, Mossi, Talensi |
| | Kwa | Akan, Bini, Ibo, Igala, Yoruba |
| | Bantu | Gikuyu, Bemba, Shona, Xhosa, Kongo |
| | Adamawa-Eastern | Mbaka, Zande |
| KhoiSan | South African KhoiSan | !Kung, ‡Khomani, Nama |
| | ?Sandawe | Sandawe |
| | ?Hadza | Hadza |

**Fig. 1:** The classification of recent African languages (after Greenberg 1963)

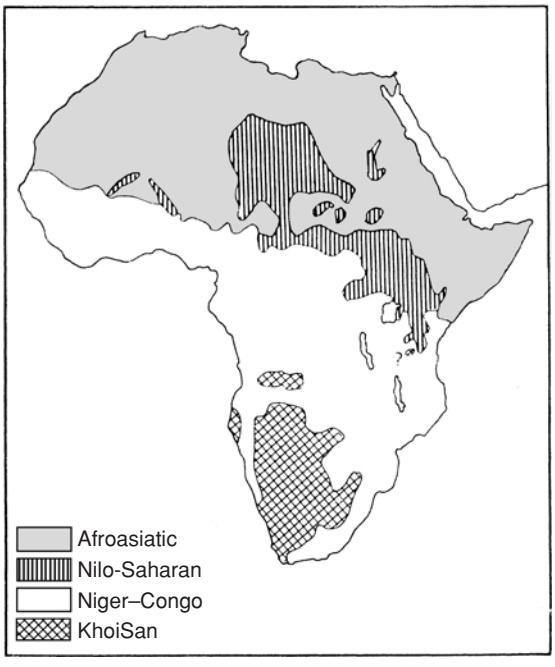


**Fig. 2:** The distribution of Africa's major language families in recent times (simplified from Greenberg 1963)

and the Cushitic tongues centred on Ethiopia and Somalia, as well as the widespread Semitic family, the modern members of which include Arabic, Amharic and Hebrew.

To the south is a very irregularly shaped area covering much of the central and southern Sahara, the southern Sudan and parts of the adjacent savanna with an extension into parts of East Africa, where most of the modern languages are classed as Nilo-Saharan, with Nilotic and Sudanic as the principal subdivisions. Songhai, spoken around the Niger bend, may also have Nilo-Saharan affinity. It may be that the present fragmented distribution of the Nilo-Saharan languages indicates that they were formerly spoken over a more extensive area.

Most of the modern languages of West Africa belong to the Niger-Congo family, which may be extended to include Kordofanian, spoken in the western Sudan. Within West Africa these languages have developed considerable diversity. On the other hand, the distribution of one sub-group of Niger-Congo extends over the greater part of central and southern Africa, excluding the extreme southwest. These are the Bantu languages which, despite the enormous area of their distribution, show a relatively strong degree of similarity with one another. The northern limit of the Bantu languages approximates to the northern edge of the equatorial forest. In the savanna woodland to the north, the Adamawa and Ubangian languages also belong to the Niger-Congo family. Niger-Congo is sometimes linked with Nilo-Saharan to form a Niger-Saharan macrophylum (Blench 1999).

As will be shown in chapter 7, there is good evidence that the Bantu-speaking peoples have expanded from a northwestern area into sub-equatorial latitudes during the course of the last few thousand years. In significant parts of this region, these new populations replaced or absorbed people who spoke languages of the KhoiSan family, such as still survive in the southwesternmost parts of the continent. These are the languages of the Khoi (formerly sometimes called by the derogatory term Hottentots) and San (or Bushmen), who have retained into recent times their traditional herding or hunting life-styles beyond the country of the Bantu-speakers. There are indications that in earlier times KhoiSan-related languages may have been spoken as far to the north as the modern Kenya/Tanzania border area, but in regions further to the west their northerly extent is less certain.

In the absence of writing it is on modern languages that historical linguists must, of necessity, base their conclusions (Nurse 1997; D. W. Phillipson 2003a). Through studying the distribution of recent linguistic forms it is often possible to reconstruct certain features of the past languages from which the modern ones are derived, and to suggest the areas in which these ancestral languages may have been spoken. The vocabulary that is attested

for these ancestral languages can tell us something about the life-styles of the people who spoke them, and about the things with which they were familiar. As different peoples came into contact with one another words were borrowed from one language into neighbouring ones; these 'loanwords' too can often be traced. It is through studies such as these that the linguistic prehistory of Africa may tentatively be reconstructed.

We have of course no precise information about the varying speeds at which particular linguistic changes proceeded. It is only in the case of languages which have a long written history that such speeds can be calculated at all precisely. Linguistics alone can provide only a relative ordering of processes and events, together with a rough estimate of the lengths of time that may have been involved. Use of glottochronological formulae to calculate the dates at which linguistic developments took place should be regarded with great suspicion, particularly when applied in non-literate contexts, since these formulae assume that language change occurs at a uniform rate. However, when links can be demonstrated between independent sequences, based respectively on archaeology and on linguistics, the chronology of the latter is placed on firmer ground. Historical reconstructions based on linguistic studies may be of particular value in supplementing the testimony of archaeology in areas where little excavation can be undertaken, and for those aspects of inter-group relationships illustrated by linguistic studies but which are difficult to demonstrate on the basis of archaeological evidence. Such linguistic reconstructions mostly relate to the past 5000 or 6000 years, although tentative attempts have been made to apply these methods to still earlier periods.

## Oral traditions

In order properly to interpret the oral historical traditions which are preserved in many African societies, we must understand the rôle that they play in those societies and the reasons for their recollection (Henige 1974; Vansina 1985). It is generally found that oral traditions are most carefully preserved and re-told among peoples who have a strong centralised political system. In such cases the function of the historical traditions is often to support the established authority, for example by explaining the origin of the ruling clan or family and the manner by which its members claim their right to rule. Several societies recognise this aspect of oral tradition and have official historians, whose task it is to preserve and transmit orthodox versions of their state histories.

Traditions which purport to relate to events of more than four or five centuries ago must generally be interpreted with particular caution. Absolute chronology (in the western sense) is not often a major interest of the

custodians of oral tradition; events may sometimes have taken place at significantly earlier periods than a literal interpretation of the traditions would suggest (e.g. J. C. Miller 1972). As with written histories, oral historical traditions tend to concentrate their attention on political events and on the activities of important individuals. They are not, therefore, a substitute for archaeology as a source of historical information, and a comprehensive picture of the African past can only be built up through the use of all available data.

## Ethnoarchaeology

Increased attention has been given in recent years to the application of archaeological perspectives to the study of recent societies and their material culture (David and Kramer 2001). To some practitioners, the principal aim of ethnoarchaeology is to gain insights to aid the interpretation of archaeological data relating to earlier periods. This is an exercise which must be approached with great caution. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that observations of recent societies are of value only in suggesting *possible* interpretations of archaeological data; they can never themselves provide conclusive proof. Secondly, use of ethnoarchaeologically based interpretations may carry the hidden implication that the recent peoples studied are in some way backward or primitive. Those who practise or make use of ethnoarchaeology must beware of thus unintentionally insulting those who have provided their inspiration. This is not to belittle the value of such studies, provided that the models which they help to generate are applied with care and sensitivity. Two examples may be cited: particularly valuable insights have been obtained into the uses and significance of stone tools (e.g. Brandt 1996) and into non-western views of the past and of time (e.g. Schmidt 1995; Stahl 2001).

## Africa in world prehistory

The archaeological picture of the African past now discernible is one of paramount importance for the study of human prehistory. As will be shown below, evidence for the life-style and physical characteristics of the earliest hominids comes at present only from African sites. While it cannot be conclusively demonstrated that human beings first evolved in Africa, there is a very strong probability that this was indeed the case. Virtually every major subsequent stage in humankind's development may be illustrated from the African record.

The succession of African hunter-gatherer societies is the longest and one of the most varied known. It extends from the origins of humanity to the