Introduction

The purpose of this book is to provide for the general reader, teacher, and student a one-volume history of sub-Saharan Africa that relates the vibrant story of the African past as it is understood by contemporary scholars. There have been three concerns that have guided us in this enterprise – accuracy, clarity, and style. We have sought to introduce the reader to the central themes of African history and to clarify the debates by historians about the African past with a zest that will seduce the reader to turn the next page and reach the next chapter.

This text is the product of many decades of lecturing, writing, and teaching African history to American undergraduates and graduate students. The dedication "To our students" should not be interpreted as a gift to them but rather an acknowledgment of the interactions with our students, undergraduates and graduates, through which we developed and decided that the approach to present the African past that flows through the following volume is the most efficacious to understand the history of the African people. Historians seldom inform their readers about their qualifications except for a brief blurb on the dust jacket. We are two professors of the history of Africa who have lived, lectured, researched, and traveled in the continent during the past half-century to publish many books, articles, and essays pertaining to the African past. More germane to this particular volume is the fact that both of us together have cumulatively taught African history at five American colleges and universities and lectured in universities in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East for more than fifty years to thousands of students, colleagues, and the general public. Through a long process of trial and error, this experience has earned us some insight into the challenges of presenting Africa's history to people who know little about the subject and whose views of Africa are most often influenced by adventure films, sensational media reporting, and racial stereotypes that are usually pejorative in content and presentation.

In writing a history of Africa for those who previously knew little of the continent and its peoples, scholars in the past have engaged in a delicate balance between the exotic and the mundane. Possessing myriad distinctive cultures, which has bestowed on its peoples a rich and fascinating past, Africa is unique among the continents, but an overemphasis on the romantic features of its history, on the one hand, runs the risk of depicting Africa as exceptional, exotic, and perhaps outside the mainstream of human history. On the other hand, to

compare the past of the African peoples with those on other continents by focusing on monumental architecture, literature, expansive states and empires, technological achievements, and other patterns familiar to scholars of world civilizations runs the risk of missing the continent's distinctive genius.

Our text begins with the premise that African history, like all human history, has been shaped by the environment. Africa's geography, geology, topography, climate, disease, soil, fauna, and flora have combined to create a unique environment that confronted men and women with specific opportunities and challenges. This constellation of nature contributed to the evolution of the first human beings. It also militated against the widespread urbanization that has characterized societies on other continents. The environment of the African continent discouraged the development of densely populated, literate, urban societies, but that same environment shaped African societies to value human relationships, in all their complexity, over material wealth and more participatory governance over autocracy.

We are not, of course, the first scholars to confront these issues or attempt to translate them for a general audience. During the 1960s, the decade of the independence of Africa, there was a scholarly explosion in the search for the African past that continues unabated to this day. By the 1970s and 1980s, historians began to seek generalizations from the massive mountain of new information in books, journals, and conferences to give greater clarity to the African past, not only for students in their classrooms but for the curious general reader who simply wanted to know about Africa. During the past twenty years, there have been several excellent introductory volumes about African history. These texts fall into two general categories. The first are comprehensive accounts, emphasizing details and narrative but neglecting the larger themes of the continent's history. Although such texts are excellent sources of hitherto unknown knowledge, they expose students to a bewildering amount of information while often leaving them no wiser about the fundamental dynamics of the African past. The second category takes a much broader approach, which characterizes our own volume, that emphasizes the larger themes that have shaped and continue to shape the continent's history. Although there is considerable merit in this approach, these grandiose sweeps of interpretation, which have influenced our own volume, often leave students and the general reader with the impression that African history consists of impersonal, mechanistic, and predetermined forces which permit the Africans little if any control over their own destiny. We, therefore, begin with the assumption that, although African history has been shaped by its unique environment, it has been made by the African people. Their personalities, their inspirations, their accomplishments, their innovations all become blurred as scholars expand the search of larger themes. Our text aspires to identify these important themes that have shaped African history, while keeping a focus on the lives and activities of the people who made those themes possible by exploring representative examples, rather than providing a catalogue of facts and figures.

A further challenge to writing such a text is the inevitable bias in favor of written sources. History is a discipline dominated by texts, and most African communities did not possess writing systems until the modern era. Thus, the historians of Africa have been largely dependent on the writings of outside observers, but the dearth of the written record also forced them to utilize other academic disciplines from the scientific and social sciences – archaeology, anthropology, ethnography, linguistics, sociology – in their search for the African past. Consequently, those African societies that have left little evidence of their activities have often been marginalized in the presentation of African history. Thus, the role of hunter-gatherer bands or stateless societies is generally of less interest to the historian, if not entirely ignored. In this respect, African history is much like the story of the man who came upon an elderly woman one evening on her hands and knees under a streetlamp searching for something. The man asked her if he could help, and she told him she had lost her car keys and was trying to find them. "Where did you drop them?" the man asked as he began to scour the ground. "Down the street," replied the old woman. "Why then," asked the man incredulously, "are you looking here?" "Because," she replied, "the light is better!"

This dearth of sources has meant that much of African history has been presented in very general terms that some students find refreshing and others find exasperating. The willingness of the academic scholar to admit his limitations may be rare in most disciplines, but in African history and in this text, it is not unusual. The gaps in our sources are matched by dramatic academic controversies about the interpretations of those sources we do possess. Rather than ignore the deficiencies in our knowledge and the debates over the interpretations of what is known, we have chosen to highlight these areas of speculation and disagreement in a series of sidebars rather than clutter the text with vehement arguments for and against that will only confuse and frustrate the reader seeking definitive answers. Instead, we seek to give readers an opportunity to consider the arguments and evidence in these debates, thereby giving them a better sense of the rich and stimulating intellectual world of the historian of Africa and allowing them to reach their own conclusions about the African past.

Attentive readers will have observed that the title has confined the text to the history of Africa below the vast Sahara Desert. This requires some explanation. We recognize the inescapable fact that every historical work inevitably concentrates on some regional, cultural, chronological, or political community. Thus, by concentrating on Africa south of the Sahara, we affirm that this region has a history peculiar to itself. It also implies an important difference between those neighboring regions – North Africa or the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean worlds – and sub-Saharan Africa. However, the important links between Africans south of the Sahara and the regions beyond cannot be denied, and where appropriate our narrative illuminates these ties. Ideas, peoples, technologies, and commodities all crossed the deserts of North Africa

and the sea lanes of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans in both directions. Our focus on sub-Saharan Africa has been influenced not only by space but by the internal integrity of Africa south of the Sahara. Anyone who has taught African history in a college or university lecture hall has experienced the anguish of editing important stories out of their narratives. Our concentration on sub-Saharan Africa is inspired by our desire to devote as much attention as possible to the relevant aspects of this story that would have been seriously diluted by the pages required to elucidate the intricately complex history of northern Africa in the Mediterranean, Asia and the Indian Ocean, and the Americas across the Atlantic. Having defined our geographic perimeters, we have in places taken the liberty in the text to use the simple term *Africa* to replace the stylistically awkward *sub-Saharan Africa* when referring to Africa south of the Sahara.

Contrary to common misconceptions, Africa is not a country but a vast continent with a cultural and geographic diversity unequaled by most other regions of the world. To relate every relevant known fact about the continent would be to burst the boundaries we have set for ourselves and bury the reader in a blizzard of blinding detail. Our book therefore is constructed around several consistent themes that are the framework for the narrative that enables us to tell a coherent story to prepare students and the general reader for greater exploration of specific topics that have attracted their attention and curiosity or larger fields of African studies that we have not addressed. Finally, this book has been composed in such a way as to give the reader more than just themes and a narrative of events. Maps, illustrations, and primary documents are included to help readers to better understand the themes and narrative in the text. Too many history texts adopt an omniscient tone and construct narratives that present history as revealed truth. We would prefer to have our readers evaluate pieces of evidence and to construct their own opinions about African history from the contents of this volume.

PART I

Foundations

1 The historical geography of Africa

So Geographers in *Africa-Maps*
With Savage-Pictures fill their Gaps;
And o'er unhabitable Downs
Place Elephants for want of Towns.

Jonathan Swift, "On Poetry: A Rapsody"[1]

The history of the African people has been indelibly stamped by their continent's geography – its deserts, Sahel, savanna, swamps, rainforests, plateaus, mountains, rivers, and lakes have shaped both the evolution of humankind in the geologic past and the historical development of African societies in the past several millennia. Africa's diverse geology and geography are reflected in the varied histories of its people.

Africa is an enormous landmass, 12 million square miles, larger than North America and four times the size of the United States. It is also the oldest continent, from which Europe, Asia, and the Americas floated away on tectonic plates many millions of years ago. They left in their wake a solid, vast, uplifted flat plateau 2,000 to 4,000 feet above sea level, which slept in its geologic continuity. Its rocks and sediments remained horizontal throughout millions of years, undisturbed by the gigantic metamorphic upheavals of the Himalayas, European Alps, and the American and Andean cordillera on the new continents.

Africa, however, was not immune to millions of years of geologic activity that shaped Earth as we know it today. There were three stable rock cores in the earth's crust below its oldest continent, which thrust upward when the primal mass of the mobile surface of the planet began to cool. As the earth cooled, its heated core would burst upward in volcanic eruptions, carrying its magma and rich minerals from the oldest rocks of the mantel through pipes into Africa – gold, diamonds, platinum, copper, nickel, tin, chrome – and rare metals – ruthenium, iridium, and osmium. Thereafter, this great landmass was governed by temperature and rainfall, which controlled the growth of its vegetation and the evolution of *Homo sapiens.*

Africa is the only continent divided by the equator into comparatively equal halves and consequently does not experience wide fluctuations of temperature.

[1] Jonathan Swift, "On Poetry: A Rapsody," in *The Poems of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Harold Williams, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937, vol. II, pp. 245–6.

Elevation, wind, and the oceans, east and west, have defined the wide variety of its environments: 40 percent of Africa is desert; the tropical rainforest is only 8 percent; the rest is a vast expanse of sahel, savanna, and wooded grasslands between desert and jungle. When there is not a dramatic change in temperature, bacteria and their insect-bearing hosts flourish to breed diseases that in temperate climes are destroyed by frost. Moreover, the consistent high temperatures rapidly decompose vegetable matter, eliminate nutrients, and leave the African soil impoverished – deficient in the humus and fertile topsoil necessary for productive agriculture. Africa is thus a stable continent resting on a granitic shield, the soils of which are starved of nutrients over 90 percent of its continental surface.

Although the soils of Africa are poor, its vegetation is rich and varied, having evolved to take the greatest advantage of the nutrients available and the amount of rainfall received. Where there is the greatest rainfall, there is the greatest luxuriance and variation of plant life. Although there are exceptions depending on elevation and soil, the regions of Africa that receive less than 16 inches of rainfall annually are the open Sahel and savanna. The more fortunate areas that receive between 16 and 56 inches of rain are thick with grass and woodlands. Regions that have an average annual rainfall of approximately 80 inches – the basin of the Congo, for instance – created the tropical rainforest, known in popular culture as the jungle. The increase in rainfall changes the cycle of vegetation from annual to perennial. The grass of the savanna is seasonal, and by recycling its nutrients annually it can provide greater forage to support a larger animal population than the rainforest. Trees are taller and live longer, some for hundreds of years. They recycle the nutrients from the soil so slowly that the forest can sustain fewer animals than the savanna because those that live there must climb trees and subsist on leaves and fruit, for there is no nutritious grass.

The great herds of animals that roam the savanna of Africa contribute to their own fecundity, as they have for millennia. Although the grasslands derive their nutrients from the soil, those that are grazed by gazelles, hartebeests, and other four-footed mammals produce twice as much forage as plant species that are not annually cropped. The more one eats the grass – *Kyllina nervosa* or *Andripogon greenwayi*, for example – the more it will produce as its evolutionary response to the greed of the herbivores. Like the mammals, the vegetation of Africa evolved to meet the optimal conditions of soil and rainfall to produce proteins and carbohydrates. The soil nutrients determine the quality of the plants; the rainfall determines their quantity. When the soil is poor, a plant may grow large with little nourishment, which requires the animals to consume large amounts of "fast food" to meet their metabolic needs. Where soils are poor in nutrients and the rainfall is more than sufficient, elephants and buffaloes eat huge amounts of deficient forage, which their digestive tracts have evolved to absorb. Other herbivores prefer the rich grasslands at the bottom of the Great Rift Valleys of East and Central Africa.

Figure 1.1 *The East African savanna.*

Figure 1.2 *Savanna land surrounding Mount Kenya.*

The Great Rift Valleys

During the division of the continents, Africa also experienced the fracture of its tectonic plate. The more stable African plateau was bisected by two deep rift valleys from south to north. The rifts are huge trenches formed as if God had sliced the continent with a great cleaver. In fact, the great African Rift Valley begins in the Mozambique Channel and moves relentlessly up the Zambezi River valley where it divides into two branches, the Eastern and Western Rift Valleys. The Eastern, or Great Rift, is a trench some 40 miles wide, the floor of which goes up and down from 1,200 to 3,200 feet with escarpments on either side rising 2,000 feet. It cuts northeast from the Zambezi through the Tanzanian Plateau and Kenya to Lake Turkana, the Omo Valley, through the Ethiopian highlands to the Danakil Depression, Red Sea, Gulf of Aqaba, Dead Sea, and the River Jordan to end at Mount Hermon in southern Lebanon. The bottom of this great ditch collects the waters that form a chain of lakes in Kenya – Natron, Mayara, Navasha, Elmenteita, Nakuru, and Turkana – famous for their prolific bird life. The Turkana Basin is the site of dozens of hominid remains from between 2.5 million to 1 million years ago where early humans struck flakes from lava flows to help them scavenge the carcasses of animals killed by carnivores.

The Western Rift bifurcates from the Zambezi Valley to cut north through Central Africa to disappear in the great swamps of the Upper Nile in the Sudan, known as the Sudd, the Arabic word for "barrier." Like the Eastern Rift, the bottom of the western branch is a chain of lakes – Malawi, Tanganyika, Kivu, Edward, George, and Albert. The bottom of its trench differs dramatically from the Eastern Rift, however. The surface of Lake Tanganyika languishes at 2,500 feet above sea level, but it is the world's deepest lake, nearly a mile at 4,708 feet. Farther north in the rift, Lake Edward, called the bird lake for its profusion of pelicans, egrets, gulls, and Nile geese, is shallow before its waters flow down the tumultuous cascades of the Semliki River to Lake Albert. Known as the Luta Nzige, "the brightness of light that kills the locusts," Lake Albert is an elongated and shallow saucer, only 160 feet deep, from which treacherous waves surge along the surface when the north winds of winter blow down the funnel of the rift. Lake Albert spills its water into the Sudd, the lugubrious swamps of the Nile, some 35,000 square miles covered by aquatic plants, lagoons, and a few people, into which the grand escarpment of the Western Rift and its waters disappear.

The rifts represent the geologic splitting of the African tectonic plate, but they later became the paths of migration where water and grass were plentiful for man and beast from northeast Africa and the Upper Nile. There was fertile soil for cultivation in the bottomland. The steep escarpments of the rifts made the passage east and west across them more difficult, but never impossible, to Lake Victoria, lying on the plateau 2,000 feet above the two rift valleys on either side and 4,000 feet above the Mediterranean. It is the third-largest