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Excerpt  
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## **Part I**

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### **Continental perspectives**

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## Perimeters

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,  
 Th'assay so hard . . .

Chaucer, *The Parlement of Foules*, I

I began original research into the African past in 1967, and taught history in African universities, first in Tanzania, and then in Nigeria, for sixteen years. My research led me to fieldwork in remote villages, and to both European and local archives. I was the first historian of the Igbo people of south-eastern Nigeria – whose population is greater than that of many independent nations – and of Plateau State. Now that I am much closer to the end of my career than its beginning, I felt drawn to attempt the history of the continent to which I devoted the best energies of my adult life.

A legend recorded among a small people in central Nigeria tells of a hero who plucks a blade of grass and through the hole reveals a whole new world.<sup>1</sup> He is then empowered by its discovery. Something of this magical transformation is experienced both by the westerner who embarks on a voyage to the cultures of other peoples and by the African who explores her own past.

And the end of all our exploring  
 Will be to arrive where we started  
 And know the place for the first time.<sup>2</sup>

The difficulty, of course, is that there is an infinite number of possible African histories. Our choices are limited by the available source materials, and also, to an extent greater than we might care to admit, by convention – the paths trodden by our predecessors. A historian who confined himself to a single region and a single theme reported, ‘Scholars who attempt to synthesise a wide range of material quickly discover that they have a limited number of tools and an infinite array of intractable difficulties.’<sup>3</sup>

I have spoken of directions chosen by other historians, but there are many such paths. At one level, this book is a series of conversations with alternative views of the African past – particularly, though not exclusively, those most conveniently called Africanist and radical – categories explored in the pages which follow. These are debates to which my own earlier writings have contributed; my own voice in the past is one of those with which I engage.

No single model does justice to the complexity of a multidimensional past. This book is organised around a number of interlocking themes. Perhaps the

most important is ecology, the interaction between African communities and their very different environments. Consciously or unconsciously, historians reflect the preoccupations of the present in their interpretation of the past. For obvious reasons, contemporary historians pay considerable attention to famines, epidemics and droughts, and these are themes which recur in the pages which follow. But a model based on scarcity does not do full justice to economies which often produced a surplus both of food and treasure. 'Here hunger is not known,' said the nineteenth-century Lozi on the Zambezi flood-plain.<sup>4</sup> Scarcity is a powerful explanatory tool for exploring the African past; but West and West Central Africa had some of the most varied currencies of the pre-industrial world. Like Africa's art treasures, they do not reflect want.

At the heart of all African history is the productive base – agriculture, pastoralism, crafts, mineral extraction, fishing, hunting and gathering. A true integration of gender into historical writing is to be attained not by concentrating on real or imaginary queens – though both find a place in this history – but by analysing production. Women often did the farming, and always processed and cooked food; they were often the potters, the spinners and weavers; in some societies they processed salt, and panned alluvial gold. Off the coast of Angola, they dived for shells used as currency. In West Africa, women usually controlled trade in foodstuffs in local markets; men traded in slaves, ivory or gold.<sup>5</sup>

The relations of production are central to an understanding of the political process. Radical history, however, has sometimes been criticised for concentrating on structures to a point where the particularity of the local community, or the life of the individual, becomes invisible.

This book is an essay in history from below. It required no conscious effort to populate it with people – they found their way into the narrative naturally and those who found no space fought for inclusion. History from below assumes a knowledge of the political superstructure; a study of the Crowd in the French Revolution presupposes some knowledge of a particular sequence of events in time. The historian of Africa cannot ignore the rise and fall of empires, which provide a much-needed chronological structure, and which impinged, of course, in varying ways and to varying degrees, on the life of the poor. African history has moved beyond an exclusive preoccupation with Great States and Big Men, but the study of the past, at least on a continental scale, can find no intelligible shape without them. And when we focus on individual experience, we find, inevitably, that it is the captains and the kings who are most fully documented.

Cognitive history is a central theme of this study; some African societies, especially in the Islamic world, have left a legacy of written texts, and much can be gleaned from oral literature. But many cognitive maps are represented in non-verbal forms, such as sculpture, body painting or textile designs. These are often difficult or impossible to locate in time, and when we interpret them in written texts there is a danger that we are in fact inventing something new. In a sense, of course, the whole business of writing about Africa is an invention, and much has been written in recent years on the artificiality of the enterprise.

A fundamental insight of much writing on Africa is the paramount importance of people (rather than land, or possessions). This is abundantly documented in

oral sources, and is often adduced to explain domestic slavery. This leaves us with a problem – why were people sold abroad in the Atlantic or Indian Ocean slave trades, or killed in religious rituals? (Neither phenomenon, of course, was universal.) There seems to have been, in the thought of many African societies, a profound tension between different loci of value – the need to share and the need to accumulate, the desire for followers and the retention of treasures. Kings accumulated treasures – regalia, valuable cloth, sculptures in ivory, copper or gold. But in the nineteenth century, the home of an Igbo villager was also likely to include a sealed room for the family's wealth, often in cowries or manillas. It is a profound irony that these currencies, introduced by Europeans, became worthless in the colonial period.

African peoples tended to view the world as a zero sum game, where the prosperity of one is obtained at the expense of another. Witchcraft stereotypes grow out of this tension; it has been called the dark side of kinship.<sup>6</sup>

This book falls into three sections. The first deals with questions of historiography and interpretation, and with prehistory, ending with the Early Iron Age. The second and third sections are organised on a regional basis – the dividing line between them lies, very approximately, in the sixteenth century. History, of course, refuses to fit neatly into chronological or regional divisions. Zwangendaba's career began in Natal and ended in Tanzania. To reflect this extreme artificiality, I have deliberately used different geographic units of analysis in successive sections.

The sixteenth century can be taken as a dividing line between 'states based on local resources' and 'political structures heavily reliant on outside sources'<sup>7</sup> – largely through the impact of merchant capitalism. This period has been called an age of commercial elites and warlords – African, Muslim and European.<sup>8</sup> But many peoples were little affected by the outer world until well into the twentieth century; the states of the Western Sudan or the Swahili coast were involved in it long before 1600.

This book ends in 1870; a second volume is planned, to cover the period 1870–1995. I am mindful, however, of the Igbo proverb that no one is certain of his meal until he has eaten it!

It is very fully documented, and I have sometimes thought uneasily of the Moroccan scholar of the early eighteenth century, who gave 2,100 lectures on the particle 'b-'.<sup>9</sup> Data about sources are located primarily in notes, to integrate them closely with the text and thus enable the student to explore the literature on which a particular interpretation is based. I have tried to provide, within the covers of a single book, materials with which to explore themes as diverse as whether the Almoravids conquered ancient Ghana, and the impact of international capitalism on the San.

The great weakness of general histories of Africa is reductionism; because they cover vast expanses of space and time, they move at a very high level of generality, and the variety and multiplicity of African realities become invisible. Reductionism is not necessarily avoided by writing at considerable length, but it is certainly not avoided without it. I have endeavoured to write, not only history from below but a history in the round, a history which finds a place for art on the

rocks, witchcraft beliefs, masking and spirit possession cults, as well as for cooking and the kitchen garden.

The modern study of Africa began in a state of euphoria; scholars believed, with Nkrumah, that if the political kingdom was attained, everything else would follow. The rapid collapse of parliamentary democracy and an ever spiralling external indebtedness soon undermined this optimism, which a partial return to democracy has done little to restore. The hopes of the optimists now focus on tiny Eritrea, and on the fragile balance of Mandela's South Africa.

Africanists sometimes fail to realise how little is known about Africa in the world around them. They would do well to reflect on the extent of their own ignorance of the history of Melanesia, or of Siberia. They are fond of affirming that it is no longer necessary to defend the existence of African history as a discipline. But, engaged in intricate debates among themselves, they often fail to realise how narrow is the beam of light all their industry sheds.

The general reader's image of Africa is derived from television and the press – a melancholy composite of Aids, famine, coups and civil war. Racial prejudice feeds on ignorance, as do political misjudgements. In contemporary Africa, hard-pressed governments sometimes question the utility of academic history. But both coups and corruption spring from despair – a despair which in its turn is rooted in a lack of historical perspective. A knowledge of the past is a necessary dimension of African self-esteem and sense of identity.

None of this, of course, means that the African past should be idealised, or romanticised.

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,  
 Nor set down aught in malice.

Othello's words are an excellent guideline for the historian of Africa. The crisis of Africa has become a truism, not only among journalists but in the scholarly community. Many believe that there is indeed a crisis without precedent, attributed variously to exploitation by the so-called developed countries, ecological catastrophe, African misgovernment – or a combination of all three. African scholars have been particularly resolute in their analysis of the last variable. Others believe that the crisis lies less in objective reality than in our perceptions of it,<sup>10</sup> that it is one more in a long series of distortions in foreigners' perceptions of Africa. Undoubtedly, exploring Africa's past sheds light on the dilemmas of the present.

I would not wish to begin this study, or end it, on a note of gloom. Instead, I would like to borrow the words of a much earlier expatriate in Africa, which were substantially true of my own long stay. (I cannot, in all honesty, endorse his praises of the water supplies!) They come from the *Kebre Negast*, the national epic of Ethiopia, finally committed to writing in 1320. In it, Azariah, the Jewish priest who accompanies Menelik to Ethiopia, has this to say: 'And from the time that we have arrived in your country everything that we have seen hath appeared good to us. . . . And as for what we have seen there is nothing detestable, and there is nothing malign in what we hear.'<sup>11</sup>

## Prelude: Africa and the historians

After a while the truth of the old tales changed. What was true before, became false afterwards.

A Kuba elder<sup>1</sup>

### Written sources

All history is ideological, because all history reflects the concerns of the individuals and societies which produce it. What is remembered, and, where possible, recorded is what is felt to be of enduring importance. Because of this, we continue rewriting history – not because new facts come to light (though they often do) but because we have learned to understand them in new ways.

A general work of synthesis is the visible apex of a pyramid, based sometimes on original research, but more often on specialised studies written by others. These rest in their turn on many different kinds of evidence. ‘African history’ is a shorthand for many very different specialisations. The historian of medieval Ethiopia works from manuscripts in Ge’ez – which few non-Ethiopians read – and only Egyptologists (who do not consider themselves historians of Africa) can understand the original records of ancient Egypt. The historian of Benin (the Edo kingdom, not the modern nation) studied records in Portuguese, Italian, French and Dutch, as well as English.<sup>2</sup> There is a vast body of material on the African past in Arabic, much of it written by Africans, and also a corpus of work in African languages, such as Fulfulde, Hausa and Swahili, transcribed in Arabic script.<sup>3</sup> A history written in Arabic by a scholar of Timbuktu in c. 1665 is called *Kitab al Fettash, The Book of the Seeker*; it would in many ways be appropriate for the present volume.

Language skills are only part of the expertise required of the historian of Africa; some studies have led their authors into subjects as arcane as the properties of copper oxides and sulphates, or the different ‘races’ of sorghum. Historians of Africa are perhaps unique in their readiness to absorb the findings of other disciplines – archaeology, linguistics, human palaeontology, botany, animal genetics, and geology – the list is far from complete.

In European sources, we perceive the African past through a glass, darkly. Its authors rarely spoke the languages of the peoples they described (this is also true of many modern academics) and they have always, inevitably, seen Africa through the ‘I-glasses’<sup>4</sup> of their own culture. A nineteenth-century English visitor sketched the bronze pectoral mask which forms part of the regalia of the king of Igala, in central Nigeria. He called it ‘not unlike “the man in the moon”’ and

drew it accordingly.<sup>5</sup> Because this sculpture still survives, we know his drawing is a travesty. But what if the original did not survive? Some of the source material in European languages was written by Africans; much of this, but not all, dates from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The autobiography of the Igbo, Olaudah Equiano (1745–97), is a justly celebrated example. He fell victim to the Atlantic slave trade as a child, but won his freedom and settled in England. Narratives from within, of course, are not immune from their own distortions. His account contains a number of literary echoes; his childhood home cannot be identified and its inconsistencies suggest it is a palimpsest of his own memories and those of other Igbo victims of the slave trade.<sup>6</sup>

### Oral literature

There is a sense in which African studies are somewhat marginal, in universities outside Africa. And yet it has been claimed that African historians have been at the cutting edge of research methodology; those who suggest this are thinking, above all, of oral history.<sup>7</sup> The collection and analysis of oral literature – not only material of an overtly historical character – is of crucial importance in the study of the African past. Many African societies kept no written records, and because the spoken word is more difficult to preserve than the written one, oral traditions are rigorously selected. What is omitted is as revealing as what is preserved, and traditions sometimes speak most eloquently through their silences.

Certain patterns tend to recur. Traditions of origin are preserved as the founding charter of a state's identity. They are often symbolically rather than literally true; their interpretation tends to be obscure and disputed. The Mbundu of Angola have at least three different traditions of origin, and the Kuba of Zaire have no less than seven alternative creation myths. The question we must ask is not 'Which is true?' but 'What kind of truth do these embody?'

In kingdoms, traditions often have a court bias, the justification of a dynasty's right to rule. This often means that facts which run counter to this claim are elided or reinterpreted – a successful usurper becomes a younger son. Whole historical epochs were personalised, and their innovations attributed to a culture hero who is often a king. Shyaam, magician and first king, is such a figure among the Kuba. In the colonial period, traditions were often changed or even invented, to support one or the other claimant to political office, and the process continues. The spread of western education has led to the publication of oral histories, a task pioneered by western-educated Africans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This has preserved information which might otherwise have been lost, but books of this kind – Johnson's history of the (Oyo) Yoruba, Egharevba on Benin – tend to become an Authorised Version, making the collection of alternative traditions impossible. For, in only too common a paradox, informants trust the printed word rather than the continuation of that oral tradition on which the book was based in the first place.

Historians have tended to concentrate on centralised kingdoms rather than on peoples who lived in small autonomous villages. There are obvious practical reasons for this – it is much easier to write a history of a unified state than of, for instance, the 2,240 village groups of the eastern Igbo! But sometimes they have

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implied that centralised kingdoms were in some way more advanced than miniature polities – though those who think so would not consider Zaire more developed than Monaco.<sup>8</sup> Historical research tends to focus on large states and major ethnic groups, and the study of small peoples, such as the Yako or Rukuba, is generally left to the anthropologist.<sup>9</sup>

The *History of West Africa to 1800*, edited by Ajayi and Crowder, is a justly celebrated work which has been through three editions, in each of which chapters felt to be out of date have been replaced. But the chapter on ‘stateless societies’, written by an anthropologist, continues to appear in it – and to be very widely cited – though the approach is ethnographic rather than historic, and it concludes with a discussion of the growth of states. Great States re-emerge, even in a chapter devoted supposedly to the so-called ‘stateless’ polities.<sup>10</sup> And sadly, papers which set out to make a case for the study of small-scale states sometimes ignore the growing corpus of work in this field, in a most determined fashion.<sup>11</sup> Oral history has often been unconsciously elitist, because it has been collected from professionals, such as griots, who looked to a court patron. A recent valuable paper pointed out that a kingdom consisted of a number of social groups, each with its own oral history. The kingdom of Jaara, in modern Mali, was overthrown by al-Hajj Umar in 1862. Almost half the people in the region where it was located are of slave descent, and women of slave ancestry are the custodians of their oral tradition. It is a profound irony that those who were abruptly cut off from their history by enslavement join the custodians of the history of the captor society.<sup>12</sup> There is a further paradox: the African scholar who drew attention to these traditions does not, as a male, have access to them.

Oral tradition proper refers to testimonies which have been passed down, as distinct from reminiscence. But the latter is a precious source for the history of our own times, recording voices which are otherwise silenced.

Historians who collect oral traditions must also do archival research, but the reverse is not always true. Archival research and fieldwork require different skills and, to some extent, different temperaments. Archival research is solitary; some of its most gifted practitioners feel ill at ease with the constant encounters with strangers which oral history requires. Whatever the reason, an otherwise excellent book such as Freund’s *Capital and Labour in the Nigerian Tin Mines* (1981) is marred by his inexplicable failure to interview living tin miners. Some historians obtain a comparable insight into individual experience by studying sources such as the popular press – but only a tiny minority of the African population was literate. Popular songs, folk tales and proverbs speak from the heart; they are a valuable source for cognitive history – the problem is that they are often undatable.

African historians collecting oral history among their own people have great advantages in fieldwork, especially in their command of the appropriate language. They may well not have the language skills or opportunity for research in widely scattered European archives. For most European historians, a facility in different European languages is more readily acquired than competence in a tonal and perhaps little-studied African language. This became evident to me in my years in Africa, in the course of innumerable encounters with historians from abroad grappling with what was then the obligatory *rite de passage* of fieldwork.<sup>13</sup>



In the case of some historians, this was a brief sojourn in the field, using interpreters, providing what was essentially a cosmetic veneer for a history in fact based on archival materials.<sup>14</sup> I made attempts to bridge this gap, first in *Igbo Worlds*, an anthology of both oral and archival sources, and later in the series *Jos Oral History and Literature Texts*.<sup>15</sup>

Some excellent works published in recent years have been based on archival sources alone. The author of one of them suggests an informal division of labour, European historians concentrating on the archives and African historians on fieldwork.<sup>16</sup> Scholars are coming to realise that the polarity between written and oral sources is itself an artificial one. The European authors of published and unpublished accounts of African history or ethnography relied on local informants, whose words are the submerged subtexts of their narratives.<sup>17</sup>

### History and anthropology

Both oral historians and anthropologists do fieldwork in Africa, and the relationship between the two is a complex and changing one. In the past, historians were often critical of anthropological writing which was frequently – but not invariably – located in a timeless and imaginary ethnographic present. But anthropologists came much closer than historians to an understanding of African societies in their total complexity, studying variables such as kinship, ritual and culture. The divorce between the two was due less perhaps to doctrinaire considerations than to the impossibility of doing justice simultaneously to both structure and process.

Meanwhile, anthropologists have become increasingly sensitive to the variable of historical change. Some of the finest studies of the African past are the work of anthropologists – Peel's history of Ilesa, Horton's accounts of cognitive change among the Kalabari, Janzen's study of Lemba.<sup>18</sup> Historical writing has become richer and more densely textured, concerned with ecological factors including climate, famine and disease, religion and kinship.

Anthropological analysis has undergone an intensive rethinking from within; much of this has been the work of African specialists, such as Fabian.<sup>19</sup> Hard questions have been asked about fieldwork and it is realised that much anthropological enquiry has been formulaic – a classic instance of an invention of Africa. Vansina points out, with characteristic insight, the remarkable degree of similarity in the vast corpus of published and unpublished ethnographic writing on the Zaire basin. This undoubtedly reflects stereotyping in the questions asked.<sup>20</sup>

### Functionalists and structuralists

Different schools of anthropology have mounted significant challenges to the methodology of the oral historian. The first form this took was functionalist – oral traditions were interpreted as a 'mythical charter' for present social realities. They often undoubtedly do work in this way, but this does not, in itself, invalidate them as a record of past events. Claude Lévi-Strauss is the founding father of structuralist anthropology, a school which was, for a time, immensely influential. He interpreted oral traditions not as more or less accurate mirrors of

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past events but as statements which embody a different kind of symbolic truth. The mind, he believes, tends universally to perceive reality in terms of paired opposites – such as Nature and Culture (symbolically expressed as the Raw and the Cooked, the title of one of his most famous books), or Life and Death. Legends which apparently tell of the foundation of states, for instance, are really essays in cosmic speculation, and belong rather to the history of ideas (which is not in itself to diminish them – rather the reverse).

Lévi-Strauss worked on Native American mythologies; his ideas were applied to central Africa in an enormously influential study by the Belgian anthropologist Luc de Heusch (see p. 112 below).

Some historians of Africa, notably Christopher Wrigley, absorbed the structuralist viewpoint to a degree which cast doubt on the literal veracity of virtually all historical traditions.<sup>21</sup> J. B. Webster and his collaborators were at the other end of the ideological spectrum, extrapolating the reigns of precisely dated kings far into the past, in a way most of their colleagues found unconvincing.<sup>22</sup>

Some historians are moving towards a more sophisticated synthesis in response to structuralism, where traditions are seen as neither entirely symbolic nor wholly true, but rather as a composite of myth and real event.<sup>23</sup> To disentangle the two is a task requiring great skill and subtlety. It was once assumed that oral traditions comprise a core of truth and a penumbra of myth. But it has been suggested that the core is a cliché, and the accretions mirror real events. But of course the symbols and clichés are also ‘real’, mirroring landscapes of the mind. Historians’ increasing agnosticism about the literal truth of the traditions they collect is mirrored in a recent dictum by the scholar who pioneered the critical use of oral testimonies: ‘For the most part [traditions of origin] represent cosmological speculation.’<sup>24</sup> These clichés, or recurrent core symbols, pose many problems of interpretation. Sometimes they are clearly part of a single far-flung complex: the myth of the immigrant hunter-king found throughout Africa’s southern savannas is an example. But essentially the same myth is found far away, among various peoples in Nigeria. Woot, the Kuba culture hero, is a Drunken King, insulted by his sons, defended by his daughter. His wife discovers salt when she is a fugitive. Does this story embody echoes of missionary stories which gradually penetrated the Zaire basin from the Atlantic coast or are such stories the great archetypes of the mind which Jungian analysis attributes to the collective unconscious?

Historians are increasingly conscious of the way in which oral traditions are shaped both by the way in which human memory operates and by the fact that they are always related for an audience. The tendency for the concrete rather than the abstract to be remembered contributes to the crystallising of events and processes as clichés. Feedback from an audience helps make the testimony a collective product.

The basic tool of historical research is the quest for independent confirmation from different sources. This is a complex task, for sources are often not truly independent. The king lists of Bunyoro and Buganda, in Uganda, largely confirm each other; a chronology based on them, and other evidence, was hailed as a triumphant step towards locating the African past in a firm temporal context. Later critiques showed first that the Bunyoro list was not truly independent, but