1 *The development of African historiography*

The first documents on the African past go back to the very origins of writing. As an integral part of both the ancient Mediterranean world and of Islamic civilization, North Africa has always contributed to the history of Africa, including that of the regions south of the Sahara. However, from the end of the eighteenth century to 1930 or thereabouts, the historiography of North Africa was dominated by the European colonialist viewpoint until, from the latter date onwards, the nationalist revival in the region incorporated historical studies into its scheme of things.

This chapter therefore mainly concerns itself with the historiography of Africa south of the Sahara, the ancient 'Ethiopia' of the Bilād al-Sūdān, with which contacts were so limited that few historical accounts were produced. Apart from documents in hieroglyphics, the first available sources are very superficial and refer to Africa south of the Sahara through legends or accounts that are sometimes indirect and occasionally obscure. Herodotus, the Elder Pliny and Strabo, for example, tell tales of travels or raids across the Sahara or along the coasts.[1] The trading circuits of Alexandrian merchants in the Red Sea and as far as the Indian Ocean provided a sounder basis for the works dealing with that region, such as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (*c.*100 of the Christian era) and the writings of Claudius Ptolemy (*c.*150 of the Christian era).

Closer to the present, regular trans-Saharan trade by camelback and sorties in the western Indian Ocean made it possible for Arab geographers and writers living between the ninth and fifteenth centuries of the Christian era, such as al-Bakrī, al-Idrīsī, Yāḳūt, al-ʿUmarī, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and Leo Africanus (Hassan ibn Muḥammad al-Wuzzaʾn), to shed light on the Sahelian regions of the Sudan and the East African coast. The problem posed by these priceless works is that of ascertaining the authority of their sources, which differ very widely in quality: sometimes they consist of first-hand information – what we would now call eyewitness reports – but in other instances they are compilations and in yet others a mixture of the two, as in the case of Leo Africanus.

Among these writers, however, there is one genius who stands out above all the

1. Herodotus was a Greek historian and geographer, who lived in the fifth century before the Christian era. The Elder Pliny was a Roman scholar, who lived in the first century of the Christian era; he completed a collective work of 37 volumes on the natural sciences. Strabo was a Greek geographer from Asia Minor, who lived in the first century before the Christian era.

others: Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406), the 'father of modern history', who was born in Tunis. His philosophy of history sees the whole process as a sort of cyclical spiral in which nomads, driven on by the energy they draw from the solidarity forged in the desert, regularly seize arable lands and urban settlements, but eventually go into decline as a result of assuming a sedentary life-style, and are deprived of the leadership by other nomads. This model, which was taken up by Marc Bloch in connection with early medieval Europe, illustrates the visionary powers of Ibn Khaldūn who, in fact, was to advance some of the tenets of historical materialism well before Karl Marx. One of the chapters of his most important work is devoted to the Empire of Mali, which was then at its peak.

Subsequently, the hegemonies of the Sahel and the Sudan were to have their own scribes, whose works included the celebrated *Ta'rīkh al-Sūdān* and *Ta'rīkh al-Fattāsh*, both of which were composed in Timbuktu in the seventeenth century of the Christian era. On the other hand, the *Kilwa Chronicle*, possibly dating from the fifteenth century, and the *Kano Chronicle*, which appears to have been written in the early nineteenth century, are more in the nature of compilations of oral traditions. More recently, in the present century, a large number of manuscripts have been discovered, showing that Arabic-speaking Africans were concerned about setting down accounts of all the countries in which they lived or through which they passed, as in the case of the *Gonja Chronicle* (*Kitāb al-Ghunja*), which deals with a small kingdom situated in the northern part of present-day central Ghana.

Mention should also be made of works written in Arabic characters, but in African languages, such as Hausa, Kiswahili and Fulfulde, which abounded at the same period. Nor must it be forgotten that, for two thousand years or more, Ethiopia has had an unbroken literary tradition, first in Ge'ez and later in Amharic, which produced such celebrated works as the chronicles of the '*Wars of Amda Sion*'.

From the fifteenth century onwards, the regions of Africa most frequented by Europeans – such as the Guinea coastlands, the region of the Lower Zaire and Angola, the lands crossed by the Zambezi and Ethiopia – were the subject of a variety of studies and accounts that are of particular interest to historians. Starting with Cadamosto in 1460, right up to Barbot and Bosman in the eighteenth century, not forgetting Dapper and his great compilation (1688), a number of writers left works on the Guinea coastlands that are invaluable pointers to the development of this part of West Africa.

Curiosity about Africans was generally rather superficial among traders, but was much more systematic among missionaries, who sought to learn more about the societies they were aspiring to change. In Ethiopia, where the written data that already existed made their task easier, the seventeenth-century missionaries Pedro Paez and Manoel de Almeida, followed by the orientalist Job Ludolf, produced the first historical works. In the Congo, Angola and the Zambezi valley, African resistance to the grasping tactics of traders gave rise to dramatic developments which are echoed in the works of writers like Pigafetta and Lopez in the sixteenth century and Cavazzi in the seventeenth, when Cadornega also produced his *History of the Angolan Wars*.

By the eighteenth century, there was a significant increase in the number of more ambitious works, such as universal histories and geographies. In fact, earlier accounts were available as sources, and there was already growing controversy about the slave

trade. Dating from this period are works such as the *Universal History*, the *History of Angola* by Silva Correia, Benezet's *Some Historical Account of Guinea*, the *Memoirs of the Reign of Bossa Ahadee* by Norris and the *History of Dahomey* by Dalzel.

This period also saw the emergence of the superiority complex, which the Europeans started to display towards the continents that they had exploited for several centuries. Their attitude was engendered by the upheavals which, since the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the scientific and industrial revolution, had bestowed overwhelming material power on Europe. But the Europeans overlooked the fact that their power was partly derived from the slave trade, which in itself had undermined societies in Africa.

Hegel (1770–1831) had no hesitation in stating in his *Philosophy of History* that Africa 'is not a historical continent; it shows neither change nor development' and that the black peoples were 'capable of neither development nor education. As we see them today, so have they always been.' This preposterous view of Africans persisted into the twentieth century, when an Oxford professor could be heard to say: 'Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness . . . and darkness is not a subject of history . . . We cannot therefore afford to amuse ourselves with the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe.'

And yet, as a result of the nineteenth-century explorations and the rush to conquer Africa, large numbers of books on the continent came to be written, including such titles as James Bruce's *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*; Bowdich's *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*; the works of the great explorer Heinrich Barth; the *Documents sur l'histoire, la géographie et le commerce de l'Afrique orientale* by M. Guillain; and Gustav Nachtigal's *Sahara und Sudan*. One of the greatest travellers of the period was Richard Burton, who was an outstanding orientalist with a keen, enquiring mind. In his *Mission to Glele, King of Dahomey* (1864), he writes: 'the pure Negro ranks in the human family below the two great Arab and Aryan races . . . The Negro, in mass, will not improve beyond a certain point, and that not respectable; he mentally remains a child'.

Certain African intellectuals, such as James Africanus Horton, engaged in heated debate on this subject with the London Anthropological Society, but to no avail. Matters were made worse when the German school of historians claimed that only written sources could provide a proper basis for history. In London, Professor A. P. Newton echoed this theory when he claimed that Africa has 'no history before the coming of the Europeans. History only begins when men take to writing'; 'primitive custom' . . . was the concern of 'archaeologists, linguists and anthropologists'. The outcome of this attitude was that the *Cambridge Modern History*, which was published in the early years of the twentieth century, totally ignored Africa, and the history of the continent was left to men like Sir Charles Lucas and Gabriel Hanotaux. Colonial and imperial history accordingly took the place of the history of Africa. Even so, of the eight volumes of the *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, only one was devoted to Africa and that to South Africa, in other words, to the history of the settlers in that region. Only the intorductory chapter, written by an anthropologist, makes any reference to the African peoples. Elsewhere, the history of Africa made a timid appearance in more

recent publications, such as the *Peuples et Civilisation* or *Histoire Générale* by Glotz, published in Paris; the *Historia Mundi*, which appeared in Berne; the *Vsemirnaja Istorija*, published in Moscow; and the *Storia d'Etiopia* edited by C. Conti Rossini. Even archaeologists took little interest in Africa since, at that time, they too were fascinated by written sources and by the discovery of ancient inscriptions. Only monumental African ruins like those of Axum or Zimbabwe found favour in the eyes of scholars, while the excavations conducted in the search for the origins of man seemed more geological than historical, so vast was the time-gap separating these embryos of mankind from populations with an actual history.

It is true that in the twentieth century anthropologists and linguists were attracted by the enormous variety of physical types, societies and languages of the continent and embarked with enthusiasm on pioneering fieldwork. In some cases, they attempted to reconstruct the history, which they thought could explain the contemporary picture. The results were sometimes catastrophic. This is particularly true of the work entitled *Races of Africa*, by the anthropologist C. G. Seligman, which was published in 1930 and in which he wrote: 'The civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites'. He concluded that all the advances made by the other groups – the Negro and the Bushman – were due to the influence of the superior Hamitic 'race'. These gratuitous and pedantic assertions were refuted by a number of authors, among them J. H. Greenberg, who demonstrated that the term Hamite was meaningless other than as a linguistic classification, which did not imply any ranking order among so-called races. By way of example, he cited 'the Hamitic-speaking agricultural Hausa . . . under the rule of the pastoral Fulani who speak . . . a Niger–Congo (i.e. Negro) language'. Nevertheless, in his day, Seligman was regarded as a master in his field, and his work as a classic. In fact, his attitude was only a reflection of the prejudice common in the environment in which he lived, whereby the whites who had conquered and dominated Africa in the nineteenth century were only continuing the civilizing process which light or brown-skinned peoples, generally labelled Hamites, had begun before them. This racist approach can be seen in other serious works by a number of subsequent authors, such as Sir Harry Johnston in his major conspectus, *A History of the Colonization of Africa by Alien Races*, and Maurice Delafosse, in his magisterial survey *Haut Sénégal-Niger*. In the latter's view, for instance, the empire of Ghana had been founded by Judaeo-Syrian migrants. Similarly, Flora Shaw, in her *A Tropical Dependency* (1906), was obsessed by the Muslim Arab influence south of the Sahara, while Yves Urvoy, in his major works *Histoire des populations du Soudan central* (1936) and *Histoire du Bornou* (1949), only saw the one-way influence of the Saharan nomads on the sedentary Negro peoples. The archaeologist Sir Richard Palmer (*Sudanese Memoirs*, 1928 and *The Bornu Sahara and Sudan*, 1936) even ranged as far as Tripoli and the Yemen in search of the driving force behind the history of the peoples of Nigeria.

The Hamitic myth was abandoned little by little, but even so a balanced approach was still not forthcoming. Between 1930 and 1950, in fact, functional anthropologists like A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and B. Malinowski wielded an overwhelming influence. They gave prominence to very thorough, but purely descriptive analyses, without going into the historical facts of the situation. Representative of this outlook were Tor Irstam's *The King of Ganda* (1944), Lars Sundstrom's *The Trade of Guinea* (1965),

Hermann Baumann's *Völkerkunde Afrikas* (1940) and Dietrich Westermann's *Geschichte Afrikas* (1952). The last-mentioned author was an outstanding linguist who did pioneering work in collaborating in the compilation of Baumann's monumental encyclopaedia, although he too did not escape the Hamitic prejudice. G. P. Murdock's ambitious work, *Africa: Its Peoples and their Culture History* (1959), suffers from the fact that its author never set foot in Africa.

Mention can also be made of *The Zimbabwe-Monomotapa Culture* (1948) by H. A. Wieschoff, who was a disciple of Leo Frobenius, a cultural anthropologist, archaeologist and historian all in one. Frobenius was a prolific author who steadily reported on the enormous amount of fieldwork he conducted in many regions all over the continent. He also came up with several original theories, some of which were brilliant, although others – such as those on Atlantis and on the Etruscan influence on African culture – were rather fanciful. Whatever we may think of Frobenius' grandiose intentions, spurred on by his unflagging enthusiasm and his deep sense of identification with Africa, he managed to collect a mass of information, which it would be worth re-evaluating and which no doubt accounts for the renewed interest currently displayed in his work.

However, it has to be acknowledged that the interest of professional historians in Africa was at its nadir at the end of the nineteenth century. Fortunately, as in the case of the *Ta'rikh* in the sixteenth century, the Africans themselves came to the rescue. Having now acquired a command of European languages, they were to make use of them to piece together the evidence about the past of their peoples. Among the titles that come to mind are *A History of the Gold Coast and Asante* (1895) by Carl Christian Reindorff and Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas*, both of which are still today reliable and essential sources for the history of their peoples.

There was also the prolific output of the first proto-nationalists, who often drew on history to defend their case and shatter the myth of black cultural inferiority. Writers in this category included J. A. B. Horton, E.W. Blyden, J. M. Sarbah, J. E. Casely-Hayford and J. B. Danquah and, even more notably, J. O. Lucas, with *Religion of the Yoruba*, J. W. de Graft Johnson, with *African Glory*, and Eva L. R. Meyerowitz, with *The Sacred States of the Akan; the Akan Traditions of Origin* (1952). Some of the last-mentioned authors attempted to trace back the history of the black peoples to remote ancestors in the Nile valley.

In some instances, at the instigation of missionaries, works of a historical character were written in African languages, as in Uganda and Yorubaland. One such example is the remarkable work *A Short History of Benin* by J. U. Egharevba (1934).

Moreover, the coming of colonization brought new practical demands with it. In order to become better administrators, it was useful for the Europeans to know something of the African past, the relations different peoples maintained with one another, and their ancient institutions. In addition, rudiments of local history were taught in the schools set up to train the future auxiliaries of the colonial administration, if only to whet their appetites for what was considered much more important – a knowledge of the history of their colonizers. Yet the works of some of these writers were conspicuous for the loftiness of tone and objectivity of the views they expressed, or at least for the accuracy of the material they collected. Examples include C. H. Stigand's

The Land of Zinj (1913), E. W. Bovill's *Caravans of the Old Sahara* (1933), Charles Monteil's *Les Empires du Mali* (1929), the works of Georges Hardy and Henri Labouret, and the imposing *Tableau géographique de l'Ouest Africain au Moyen Age* (1961) by Raymond Mauny.

Formal structures were gradually established, especially in the French colonies, with the setting-up of the *Comité d'études historiques et scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*, which was forerunner of the *Institut français de l'Afrique Noire* (IFAN), created in Dakar in 1938, whose *Bulletin* and *Mémoires* were to mark the course of research. From 1947 onwards, the Société Africaine de Culture and its journal *Présence Africaine* made an outstanding contribution, while African intellectuals, trained in the techniques of historical method, applied those techniques to their continent, restoring objectivity and adding to the methodology, especially by wider and more intensive use of such sources as oral tradition, linguistics, and so on. In this context, we might mention the symposium on the problem of the peopling of Ancient Egypt, organized in Cairo by Unesco.

Last, but by no means least, universities, the privileged seats of research, were gradually established. In this regard, a clear lead was taken by the colonies of Great Britain, which had already created the remarkable School of African and Oriental Studies. Liberia College in Monrovia and Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone had both existed from the nineteenth century, but, from 1948 onwards, a whole set of university institutions came into being in the Gold Coast and Nigeria, in Khartoum and Kampala (Makerere College), in Dakar (1950) and Leopoldville (Lovanium in 1954). The professional historians from those universities or from the industrialized countries made it possible for Africans to take over, although not without some prompting. In 1956, at Ibadan University Professor K. O. Dike became the first African director of a history department.

Since the end of the Second World War, the historiography of Africa has become increasingly similar to that of any other part of the world, although, while abiding by the general principles of historical criticism, it has naturally had to adopt various specific technical approaches in order to deal with certain problems. It should, however, be stressed that this progress would have been impossible without the process by which Africa threw off the colonial yoke: the armed revolt of Madagascar in 1947, the independence of Morocco in 1955, the heroic war of the Algerian people and the struggle for freedom in all the African colonies enabled Africa to think for itself about its own past.