

TOWARD A HISTORY OF AFRICA

It is now almost two centuries since James Cook discovered the oikoumene, and fifty years since explorers planted their flags at the Poles. Clio has marched more cautiously. Historians, those sons of Herodotus, have only slowly rounded off his domain. The textbooks of my childhood remained confined to the Mediterranean and the "little promontory" of Europe, as at the times of Bossuet. I would not swear that they have progressed very much. If La Fontaine required two days to travel from Paris to Clamart, a single day suffices for us to reach the tip of Africa, and soon we will be able to circle the globe several times in eighty minutes. The earth is no more than a house and the antipodes are close neighbors. It is no longer enough, therefore, to know only oneself and one's own history.

Undoubtedly, the world of the historians today is wider than that of the textbooks. However the great historical collections in which India, China and America are included, have scarcely touched on Africa south of the Sahara. In this regard Herodotus' limits remain ours. Our Europocentrism was satisfied up to now

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Toward a History of Africa

with the history of colonization, that is to say of ourselves.¹ Now that the real Africa, that of its peoples, is abruptly surging forth and making headlines, it is time to know it in order to understand it and in order to bring to completion, with it, the history of our planet.

What is the explanation of this delay? Partly because of the habit of classical historians to make use only of written documents, a reflection of our "written civilization." Thus, history has gone off the path, has forgotten its origins. Herodotus and Gregory of Tours replied upon spoken inquiry, on oral tradition. On the other hand, professional historians did not go to Africa. It was the missionaries or administrators who sometimes, in connection with their duties, concerned themselves with the African people and their past. Thus, Delafosse could achieve the first important reconstitution of Sudanese history,² putting together local traditions and Arab documents. Already before him in Madagascar, R. P. Callet, had patiently gathered together and put in order an incomparable *corpus* of traditions regarding the past and the customs of the Merina,³ thus opening the way for that which is known today as "*ethno-history*."

Nothing is less certain than that this appellation is logical and likely to last. History is one and its basic method universal. But "ethno-history" usefully marks a moment and an enlargement, an escape from the pure written document, from the paper prison, toward other sources. Oral tradition is the first; but one must also count on auxiliary sciences: ethnography, linguistics, archaeology, geography, ethno-botany and many others, from radio-activity for the utilization of carbon 14 to oceanography for the study of maritime routes. Not that the written document should be rejected, far from that; the collection and conservation of archives are, on the contrary, one of the major

¹ The history of colonizations, of course, constitutes an important aspect of African history. Ch. A. Julien, particularly, has freed it of its apologetic vein and dealt with it according to its due.

² Maurice Delafosse, *Haut Sénégal, Niger*, 3 vols., Paris, 1912.

³ R. P. Callet, *Tantaran'ny Andriana etc. Madagascar*, 1st edition, Tananarive, 1873.

concerns of the historian dealing with lands beyond the seas. But in most cases written records are rare or non-existent for pre-colonial epochs. Therefore, ethnological techniques, first of all, are added to those of the classic historian. Whence this name, ethno-history, which presupposes the co-existence of two disciplines in a team or in a single individual.

It is apparent that, seen from this perspective, history is drawing closer to the school of L. Febvre and F. Braudel, who place primary stress on mass movements over individual history. This is not by choice but by necessity. With exceptions, only occasionally does the individual play a role in the African past. We have to do with masses, sometimes stratified, often homogeneous, whose existence and evolution can be retraced only in blocks. Here, "uneventful" history is the rule, and the easiest aspect to be grasped. That is why one can historically understand peoples (so numerous in the forest region or among the paleo-nigritics without contacts and without kingdoms, a history which turns its back on "great history" and which even from the classic point of view might to be a "*non-history*," an "*anti-history*." Static? Certainly not, but moving almost imperceptibly, movements often reconstituted according to ethnographical and linguistic rather than historical facts.

Indeed, our old-style history, that which seems most natural, most simple to us, history "according to events," in this case would appear to be most difficult to establish. Chronology, that spinal column of history, often appears as doubtful as the directions indicated. Time and space flee from the historian who loses his way in a universe of clouds. Each clan, each lineage, nay, even each family has its tradition inconsistent with that of its neighbors. Sometimes the selfsame group makes use of two contradictory traditions without being troubled by the contradiction. Thus, Madame Dieterlen reveals to us, the Ga declare themselves mythically descended from the Mali (that is to say from the North), but their genealogies indicate that they come from the East.

These uncertainties of oral tradition have contributed toward having it rejected as a worthy document by the fanatics of the exclusively written source. Therefore it was necessary that a rigorous methodology be established, adapting historical methods

Toward a History of Africa

to new realities. This work was undertaken by a young Belgian ethnologist, J. Vansina⁴ who, it would seem to me, has finally given respectable status to the collection and utilization of traditions.

Collecting and evaluating constitute an enormous work if one wishes to carry it out honestly. Either a researcher who can spend much time for a delimited area, or numerous teams under a single head, are necessary. The first case was that of Vansina among the Bakuba; it is also that of the scholar, Ahmadou Hampaté Ba, who is gathering together in his own personal but very efficient way, the traditions of Nigerian Sudanese history during the last century. Belonging to the second category are the "Benin-scheme" and the "Yoruba-scheme," which have been carried out for the last five years in southwest Nigeria by Nigerian professors Diké and Biobaku with about sixty research assistants.

As yet there are only tiny islands of clarity in the immensity of "the shadows of Africa." How many decades will be necessary, even supposing that systematic work should commence now, in order to collect together all the African tradition? Indeed, these are dying every day with the old people who know them. Let us add that their temporal significance is limited. An oral tradition of more than three centuries (and often much less) ordinarily finds itself commingled with so many mythical elements that it is of more interest to the ethnologist than to the historian.

Therefore, recourse to other sources of information, which I have indicated above, is imposed on us, whether to control the tradition or to fill in its gaps. In this regard, archaeology renders valuable services, both in East Africa and in Rhodesia as well as in West Africa with the IFAN teams under the direction of R. Mauny, in Chad with the Sao remains excavated by J. P. Lebeuf, in Nigeria with the sensational discovery by B. Fagg of Nok civilization going back more than three thousand years B.C. For the Sudan and Coastal regions, Arab documents of the Middle Ages and European documents from the fifteenth century

⁴ J. Vansina, "Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba", *Journal of African History*, No. 1, 1960. The author is going to publish a work on the same subject: "La valeur historique de la tradition orale et l'histoire Kuba," *Annales du Musée Royal du Congo Belge*.

on, offer us sources of the first order, perhaps insufficient in themselves but which, with other materials, may permit us to construct a dated and verified history.

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"History is difficult" sighed Fustel de Coulanges dying at his task. African history is more difficult than any other; perhaps a century of continuous effort will be necessary in order to set it up on a solid foundation, without even being able to hope that certain sides of the edifice will ever be constructed, for want of material.

Must "we" therefore wait until then to dare to write? No, for numerous reasons, of which two are obvious:

First of all, much has already been written: travelers' notes, collected traditions, results of specialized researches, first efforts at syntheses; all of this, of course, is not of prime value but at the same time, rarely is it utterly useless; with scientific spirit one might hope to distinguish, in the main, risky sources from those which would seem solid. Furthermore, some of these current materials are irreplaceable. The fact that they were carried out by specialists prevents them from being forgotten or used in an un-scientific way. Thus (in the field of ethnography but playing its part in history), the undertaking of the Monographs of the International African Institute, which is setting out to publish bibliographical syntheses supplemented by field studies, covering the entire continent, people by people.⁵ Let us also observe that the regular meetings of historians and archaeologists dealing with Africa (the last held in London in 1957) have recently led Professors Fage and Oliver to organize a review⁶ which keeps abreast not only of research but all essential books.

On the other hand, the political awakening of Africa does not permit its historians to fall asleep. New nations need a history as they need a constitution, a national anthem and a flag. France, having become a nation, gave birth to a Michelet. Genius is

⁵ *Ethnographic Survey of Africa*, No.'s appearing to date: English Series 32, French 8, Belgian 5, South African 4, Madagascan 1.

⁶ *The Journal of African History*, Cambridge University Press.

always an unpredictable occurrence; but one may at least hope that this task of retracing the complete path of each of these new states will be carried out by informed and objective historians. Otherwise it will surely be accomplished outside of their ranks without concern for honesty, and according to the ever-changing and combative hazard of passions, sects and fashions; it will no longer be history. The African peoples, having become nations, must no more be treated like children fed on fables; they have a right to the truth.

These reasons and pressing circumstances led to the launching of the idea of a collection in which each of the new African states would have its history like the old European countries. These are only first syntheses, provisory but necessary. There the nations will find their roots and historians will find constructions, bibliographies, even subjects fruitful with contradictions. In any case a job undertaken which will not have been in vain.

My *Histoire de Madagascar*⁷ fits into this picture. The four large volumes of the *Bibliographie de Madagascar* by Grandidier bears witness to the mass of writing dedicated to that great island. However, a complete synthesis had never been attempted. In writing of the Madagascan people from its mysterious origins down to its rewon independence, many hypotheses, comparative materials, and regulations were not available to me. I have always indicated my steps in order to permit my successors to pick up the thread, hoping that they will be able to weave more correctly and fill in the gaps at numerous points. Whatever merit my initial reconstruction possesses, is due to the sincerity and care with which I tried to untangle the chaos. Contrary to what I feared, I did not find it difficult in my final chapters to render justice at the same time to France and Madagascar, both of which are dear to me. A solution given by Montesquieu: "Be true always, even about one's own country. Every citizen is obliged to die for his country; no one is obliged to lie for it."

Apart from national histories, each of which involves a considerable effort, is it possible from now on to conceive of a history of all of Africa? The answer is offered by three works which have just appeared.

⁷ H. Deschamps, *Histoire de Madagascar*, Paris, Berger-Levrault, 1960.

B. Davidson,⁸ especially known for his sympathetic African reportage, has warmly demonstrated in recent works (especially those dealing with the West and East coasts of the continent), that, though it is involved in world history, Africa has had, in many ways, its own—and, at times, brilliant history.

In a volume of 715 pages stuffed with facts, bibliographies, traditions genealogies, R. Cornevin⁹ has laboriously and audaciously attempted to provide the essential elements of their past for all the peoples of Africa grouped by historical regions. It would seem that he has sought to do for history what Bauman and Westermann achieved for ethnology in their *Peuples et Civilisations de l'Afrique*, bible of the Africanists. His prodigious knowledge of French, English and especially German works has enabled him to present a picture as detailed as possible without, however, sacrificing clarity. The first section, of two hundred pages, sets down an inventory of source materials, influences and civilizations. Such an enormous effort will inevitably give rise to criticism of detail on the part of specialists in each "showcase." Nevertheless, everyone will happily benefit by knowing the entire work. As a source of reference and orientation, Cornevin is, from now on, an indispensable instrument. Let us note, by the way, the author's modesty and the solicitude with which he recalls the works and the very images of great vanished predecessors like Frobenius, Westermann, Delafosse, Labouret, and Griaule not to mention living scholars like Monod and Herkovits.

In contrast with this smiling encyclopedism is the trenchant attitude of G. P. Murdock¹⁰ which has already aroused severe criticism. Unlike Cornevin, an "African" by profession, and unlike the globe-trotter Davidson, Murdock frankly acknowledges that

⁸ B. Davidson, *Old Africa Rediscovered*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1959. A French translation should soon appear, published by the Presses Universitaires de France.

⁹ R. Cornevin, *Histoire des peuples de l'Afrique noire*, Paris, Berger-Levrault, 1960.

¹⁰ G. P. Murdock, *Africa, Its Peoples and Their Culture History*, New York, McGraw Hill Book Co., 1959.

Toward a History of Africa

he has spent only ten days in Africa. I believe in the value of prolonged contact in order to know a people and speak about it, taking account of all the nuances of its reality. Murdock's work, with its theoretical presuppositions and sometimes bewildering hypotheses, is, nevertheless, in my opinion, a quickening leaven, if only for the controversies and verifications that it will draw upon itself, as a lightning conductor attracts the thunderbolt. Denying all value to oral traditions, Murdock rests his reconstruction of the African past—aside from various elements of comparative ethnology and linguistics on the distribution of cultivated crops. His two principal revolutionary theories are the existence of a millet civilization on the upper Niger from the fourth millennium B.C. and the conquest of all equatorial Africa up to Benin, through the continent, by Indonesian plants introduced on the East coast.

It is clear that the future of the History of Africa promises to be wide open.

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What value has this history and all the time which it involves? A variation of the eternal question "What is the use of History?" to which historians have never ceased replying with tomes full of good arguments (a skeptic would be satisfied in kicking back the ball: "What's the use of anything?").

If one considers the people of Africa, history presents a double face: change and continuity; both of them useful.

It brings to bear the idea of becoming, of evolution, of change. Until that point, what took the place of history—that is to say, myths, genealogies, ancestral custom—had as their effect and aim the congealing of societies, encasing individuals in immutable hierarchies. As among the Romans, "*res novas facere*" is to make a revolution, to upset the order of the world, the expiable crime of the Greeks, History introduces the notion of movement. It reflects the appearance of individualism, the liberation from social and cosmic determinism. From then on, all changes appear possible and some of them desirable with the least possible delay. Man ceases to be crushed by the gods and can seize his fate in his own hands. In an Africa which must

re-create itself rapidly and energetically, there is no feeling more necessary.

At the same time, Africa inevitably wants to endure, and not permit itself to become absorbed or dissolved into a flat copy of the West or of the East. Here is where continuity plays its role. The history of Africa will provide the Africans with the knowledge of themselves. Troubled by conquests, submission, loss of traditions, they often take refuge in pathetic Manichean myths which sometimes make them scorn their past and aspire to a total westernization, sometimes cause them to exalt their "negritude" beyond all limits, claiming it to be the origin of all the civilizations of the world. In this adolescent crisis, history can be a good teacher, bringing a sense of reality to the Africans and helping them to know their exact place in the world, the interdependence of mankind, but also teaching them what they have been in the past and what honorable values are contained in every civilization, restoring a faith in themselves, permitting them to affirm their personality without destroying or copying the others. Thus they will be able to adapt themselves without abjuring themselves. National history instructs us not to neglect ourselves; that is why, without sacrificing the truth which is its *raison d'être*, it links up with ancient myths.

But the usefulness of non-European history is not limited only to Africa. It can be for us Europeans an opportunity to get out of our ruts. The idea of a linear development of history dates from the time (yesterday) when only the history of Europe was known; it appeared among European philosophers and historians. In China we find a cyclic history, the same in Ibn Khaldoun; among the blacks, history is mythical, cosmogonic. Europeans may imagine that their conception, once the barriers are broken, is going to extend all over the world, and that in a unified humanity, we are marching toward oneness. As a matter of fact, profusion and diversity would seem to undo all attempts to confiscate the famous "sense of history." Heraclitus limited himself to affirming the fluidity of things, not the existence of a single river, simple avatar of ancient "fatality." Day by day, the passage of the social sciences through our planet is dislocating the simplistic constructions of the old theoreticians. This does

Toward a History of Africa

not result in the denial of human unity; on the contrary it confirms it; but it is the unity of the Ocean.

Especially let us not think that an entire world has been annihilated in Africa because governments and mode of dress have changed. "Civilizations," said E. F. Gautier, "are not eternal, but they have tough lives." For a long time to come the study of civilizations can still be a source of scientific nourishment, an intellectual enrichment, a way of understanding men, basing their fraternity on a solid foundation, lending a wider connotation to the word "Humanity."

Little by little the barriers are dissolving between continents and entire peoples. From monads isolated in the interests of their own static perfection, we are passing to an epoch which is beginning to perceive terrestrial space and temporal becoming, hence, troubled and unstable. In the world of tomorrow, extended over a unified globe, its distances abolished, the monad will reconstitute itself on a planetary scale, if infinite space and unseizable time are not in force. Two mandates of escape and measure, avoiding stagnation, permitting man to surpass himself without abolishing himself. The precious disquietude of history.