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PAST AND PRESENTISM: THE 'PRECOLONIAL' AND THE FORESHORTENING OF AFRICAN HISTORY*

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ABSTRACT: This article considers the marginalization of precolonial history from mainstream Africanist scholarship in recent decades, and argues that this can be understood in the context of a scholarly culture that attributes an exaggerated significance to the history of the twentieth century. The article highlights some of the work that continues to be done on Africa's deeper past, with a view to demonstrating the enormous value of such research in elucidating present-day issues. It also argues, however, that work on the modern period is preponderant, and that there is a clear tendency toward historical foreshortening, evidenced in recent scholarship on such topics as conflict and ethnicity.

KEY WORDS: colonial, historiography, precolonial, postcolonial.

PREAMBLE

I begin with a disclaimer, namely that reports of the death of precolonial African history are greatly exaggerated. Some older readers will note that we have been here before; precolonial studies have been in crisis for quite some time, perhaps for the best part of the last forty years. In the late 1970s, Roland Oliver was already concerned that there were 'fewer people working on precolonial subjects' compared to just a few years earlier;[1] in the course of the same decade, Jan Vansina was increasingly conscious of the fact that 'precolonial history' was becoming 'distinctly unfashionable', not least because of the emerging influence of Marxist-minded historians whose ideas could best be tested in a colonial setting.[2] The anxieties have clearly been present for many years, and yet work on precolonial topics continues.

The caveat duly posted, let us move to the inevitable 'however': the precolonial has been increasingly marginalized from the scholarly mainstream, while 'modern' history – and in particular the abiding fascination with the colonial era – exercises an entrenched and disturbing hegemony over the direction and focus of professional research.[3] Indeed, the term 'precolonial' itself is profoundly unsatisfactory: at the very least, its utility is variable according to time and place, but more importantly it privileges the 'colonial' and attributes to the latter a transformative power and a significance that,

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[1] R. Oliver, *In the Realms of Gold: Pioneering in African History* (Madison, 1997), 363.

[2] J. Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison, 1994), 205.

[3] See also D. Schoenbrun, 'Conjuring the modern in Africa: durability and rupture in histories of public healing between the Great Lakes of East Africa', *American Historical Review*, 111:5 (2006), 1403–39.

I will argue, is greatly overstated. We appear, however, to be stuck with the term for the time being: it is convenient, and readily understood.

The central argument of this article is that the relative demise of precolonial scholarship should be a matter of profound concern, for it has involved the detachment of Africa's turbulent present – and its recent past – from deeper patterns of both change and continuity. In some of the scholarship discussed later, the notion of the *longue durée* – by which is meant that particular environmental, social, political, and economic processes, both shifting and constant, can only be fully understood over the long term within defined areas – has proven invaluable in linking the deep past with contemporary conditions. In other work, the link between past and present is less explicit, with the focus squarely on a more enclosed patch of precolonial time; but such scholarship, whether consciously or otherwise, still facilitates a sharper appreciation of more recent events. In both cases, the study of the precolonial is often deeply insightful, and the diminished significance attached to such research over the past thirty years – and the parallel rise of colonial studies – is a worrisome development. African history has been foreshortened to the point where 'presentism' – the compression of supposedly 'relevant' events and processes into a few decades since the beginning of the twentieth century – drives much scholarly output, whether consciously or otherwise.

THE PARTITION OF SCHOLARSHIP

There was a time when African history *was* precolonial history. During its emergence as a serious academic discipline in the course of the 1950s, it was interest in the continent's deep past that drove the bulk of 'new' research. Certainly, for much of the 1950s and 1960s, an understanding of the precolonial past was a crucial element in Africa's first bloom of independence, a core component of so many confidence- (and nation-) building exercises across the continent. Doubtless there was naivety, as well as political cynicism, in the project; no doubt the expectations that attended the raising of new flags, and concomitantly the renewed celebration of Africa's rich and complex past, were in many ways misplaced. But the marginalization of the precolonial was as swift as was the ascent of colonial history, the latter rapidly becoming the mainstream in African historical research. Contemporary history, meanwhile – which in the African context usually refers to the postcolonial era – continues to expand.

Several factors can be identified in the decline of precolonial history. In methodological terms, there was a sharp deterioration in the confidence that had been placed in 'oral traditions'. The optimism that had initially surrounded such sources – which, it was argued by the pioneer historians of the 1960s in Dar es Salaam, Ibadan, and elsewhere, offered compensation for the absence of the documentary record – was increasingly questioned. Perhaps, after all, these were not windows on the past but mirrors reflecting the circumstances of their transmission. Scholars who continued to pursue the oral did, indeed, find it less problematic to utilize such sources in the reconstruction of the early part of the twentieth century, or at a push the late nineteenth. At the same time, as colonial archives opened up in the 1970s and 1980s, they offered a range of new possibilities in terms of research on the

colonial era. Yet ease of access to the more recent past only partially explains the shift; additionally, the mounting political and economic crises experienced across the continent in the 1970s and 1980s bred disillusion with the nation-building projects launched with such fanfare a few years earlier, and of which research on the deeper African past had been such a key part. Instead, the focus shifted to the age of imperialism and colonial rule as perhaps possessing the clues to Africa's modern malaise, for something had surely gone 'wrong' in those supposedly vital years, as Europeans mismanaged their charges and Africans struggled to build competitive new communities in the face of political oppression and economic underdevelopment.

Just as important, in practical terms, was the fact that the Africa of the 1970s and 1980s and beyond was a rather more difficult place to do fieldwork than it had been in the 1950s and 1960s. Younger scholars could only listen enviously to tales of transcontinental research trips by road, and of pristine and helpful local administrations guaranteeing both security and access. These were problems facing foreign scholars; for African scholars, the situation was altogether worse. Political and financial crises combined to profoundly weaken higher education across the continent; universities were either seen as potential sources of trouble, whether from staff or students, and were undermined accordingly, or withered slowly as funds dried up and faculty fled abroad. Research was rather less important than the daily struggle for survival that became, and remains, the lot of many African university staff. This was in turn a problem for foreign researchers, who found their institutional points of contact across the continent less reliable and indeed less interested. The disastrous outcome of all this was the emergence of the current vast gulf between most scholarship produced in the West and in Africa.

It is also the case that the new so-called 'history from below', evident in most branches of historical research from the 1960s onwards, was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to apply to the deeper African past; the sources, it was argued, were simply not available. The shift from high political to socioeconomic history meant that 'oral traditions', for example, were of little use to scholars less interested in kings (on which such sources were usually illuminating) and more concerned with the material and environmental dynamics that sustained them and their societies. Too many key groups – women, most obviously – were missing from the available historical record. Indeed, there were pressures on Africanists from within the historical profession more broadly to deal with the kinds of themes – gendered histories, social change, the nature of the colonial encounter – that would enable them to communicate with their colleagues in other fields. In this sense, Africanists often found themselves emulating more mainstream colleagues in the quest for approval and 'legibility' – particularly important in terms of job security. All of this connected with, or was driven by, a pervasive presentism in scholarly culture. It meant that, by the 1980s and 1990s, there was a growing chasm between those who 'did' the deep past and the majority who concerned themselves with the more recent past. It amounted, in effect, to a repartition of the continent in scholarly terms: this new 'scramble' saw a division created between the precolonial and the 'modern', seldom crossed.

What follows is a necessarily selective discussion of the issues of enduring interest, or those that have emerged in recent years, in precolonial

scholarship. The purpose is to highlight some of those areas in which an understanding of the deeper past helps to elucidate more recent developments, or at least in which a scholarly debate has taken place – even if there are legitimate disagreements over just how much the deep past should inform understandings of the recent past – or might yet take place. Again, it is clear that a more thorough examination of precolonial conditions often provides more effective parameters within which to consider the recent past, while an appreciation of the persistence of particular dynamics from the deep past to the present – such as environmental or economic constraints and opportunities – has frequently illuminated the present, and may yet do so. Some core themes – economic development, urbanism, environmental management, the nature of political authority – have also been the focus of much of the work done on the twentieth century. The final section of this article will pick up on one such theme of continuing interest, namely organized violence, which will be used to demonstrate the current perceived disconnect between the precolonial and the modern. It will also deal with another issue of enormous interest in recent years to historians of the colonial and postcolonial eras – ethnic identity – with the same purpose in view. Warfare and ethnicity can be utilized to highlight the problem inherent in the scholarly partition, but these are also topics that offer great potential in terms of bridging the divide.

EXPLORATIONS IN THE DEEP PAST: THE STATE OF THE PRECOLONIAL ACADEMY

It is doubtless self-evident, but worth emphasizing at the outset, that the methodologies employed and the sources utilized have a direct bearing on the kind of history that gets written. The archaeological record sends us in one direction – the charting of environmental change, for example, or the reconstruction of the domestic economy – while the European documentary record sends us in another, notably in terms of long-distance trade (including the slave trade), political structures, and violent conflict. Clearly, precolonial scholarship that relies primarily on European documentation can deal with little before the early sixteenth century – at least as far as sub-Saharan Africa is concerned – and, as will be evident, a great deal of it is only *just* precolonial, concerned for the most part with the nineteenth century.

The archaeological record, to begin with, has long formed the foundation upon which work on later periods is undertaken,[4] as has research in historical linguistics; both fields demonstrate, whether explicitly or otherwise, the utility of the deep past in contextualizing more recent phenomena. Work on early population distribution, domestic economy, and commerce has implications for later periods.[5] This is evident in emerging interpretations of

[4] G. Connah, *African Civilisations: Pre-colonial Cities and States in Tropical Africa: An Archaeological Perspective* (Cambridge, 2001); A. B. Stahl (ed.), *African Archaeology: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford, 2005); D. Phillipson, *African Archaeology* (Cambridge, 2005); L. Barham and P. Mitchell, *The First Africans: African Archaeology from the Earliest Toolmakers to Most Recent Foragers* (Cambridge, 2008).

[5] R. J. McIntosh, *Peoples of the Middle Niger* (Oxford, 1998); M. Horton, *Shanga: The Archaeology of a Muslim Trading Community on the Coast of East Africa* (London, 1996); M. Horton, *The Swahili: The Social Landscape of a Mercantile Society* (Oxford, 2000).

long-term shifts in patterns of settlement in West Africa, for example, that suggest clusters of urban growth in the interior for a millennium before the fifteenth century, whereupon there was an accelerating process of urbanization along the coast with the expansion of European trade.[6] This clearly has significance in terms of our understanding of the interior–coast population shift in the twentieth century, and of the long-term economic development of both littoral and inland regions. A related pattern of the urban becoming the rural over the long term has been elucidated for Pemba on the Swahili coast, which Adria LaViolette and Jeffrey Fleisher find was an urban centre in the centuries before 1500, rather than the rural periphery that it came to be characterized as in a later period.[7]

Meanwhile, historical archaeology is expanding, and the collaboration involved between different sets of sources and methodologies has facilitated more detailed comprehension of, notably, the domestic economy and urbanization in western Africa in the era of the slave trade. In their introduction to a recent special edition of the *International Journal of African Historical Studies* (*IJAHS*) dedicated to the current state of African archaeology, Ann Stahl and LaViolette note the widespread concern that archaeologists and historians have grown ever further apart, and that their work rarely intersects.[8] One reason for this, clearly, is that historians' concerns have shifted decisively into the modern era. But it is noteworthy that, whereas historians are now overwhelmingly concerned with the twentieth century, archaeologists have moved from 'pre-history' to the pre- or early modern eras, and that historical archaeology is in fact flourishing, especially in the United States.[9]

This is clear from the contents of the *IJAHS* volume in question, which demonstrates the healthy state of the discipline, particularly in the western African context. In his examination of Ouidah and its environs, Neil Norman makes clear that archaeological work enables us to see beyond the confines of the European documentary record and into the adjacent countryside. The importance of the linkages between the urban and the nearby rural will resonate with modern urban historians, while Norman also points to the ways in which material objects, frequently acquired through trade, generated processes of social stress and negotiation.[10] Akinwumi Ogundiran also explores material culture in his study of the domestic economy of Oyo, and argues that imported goods became imbued with meaning at the local level and represented the paraphernalia of political authority in ways only revealed

[6] C. R. DeCorse and G. L. Chouin, 'Trouble with siblings: archaeological and historical interpretation of the West African past', in T. Falola and C. Jennings (eds.), *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed* (Rochester, NY, 2003), 10–11.

[7] A. LaViolette and J. Fleisher, 'The urban history of a rural place: Swahili archaeology on Pemba Island, Tanzania, 700–1500 AD', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 42:3 (2009), 433–56.

[8] A. B. Stahl and A. LaViolette, 'Introduction: current trends in the archaeology of African history', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 42:3 (2009), 374.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] N. L. Norman, 'Hueda (Whydah) country and town: archaeological perspectives on the rise and collapse of an African Atlantic kingdom', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 42:3 (2009), 387–410.

through combining historical narratives and archaeology.[11] This co-option of the external likewise has resonance in the more recent past. These articles reflect the wider phenomenon of historical–archaeological collaboration, witness for instance Christopher DeCorse's work on Elmina[12] and more recent work in southern Africa.[13] More detailed images of long-term change, as well as continuity, are what result from such collaboration; as James Denbow puts it in the west African context, 'While written documents provide details for some regions on the scope of trade, archaeological and oral histories can help to fill in blank spaces and, more specifically, map such relations onto geographic locations seldom mentioned otherwise.'[14]

Archaeologists have also been instrumental in the uncovering of environmental change over time: Paul Lane, for example, has shown both that soil erosion in Kondoa district in Tanzania started much earlier than colonial officials had believed – though they were indeed correct to identify it as a problem – and that local inhabitants had established ways of managing it. Lane is explicit in his desire to 'provide a more robust knowledge base from which future land use policy and soil conservation measures might be developed'.[15] Elsewhere in the region, work in northern Ethiopia – long a mainstay of archaeological research on urbanization, material culture, and political authority – has been somewhat curtailed by war and resultant tensions in the area.[16] Likewise, progress was being made in Eritrea – the excavation of significant pre-Axumite settlements – until war with Ethiopia and local political difficulties led to its curtailment.[17] In 2000, as invading Ethiopian troops withdrew from Eritrean territory following the ceasefire, they attempted to blow up a pre-Axumite stele at Metara.[18] The deep past mattered, clearly, although this act only demonstrated ignorance of it.

Historical linguistics, meanwhile, has facilitated many of the larger theses on Africa's deeper past in recent decades. While Vansina and Nurse remain

[11] A. Ogundiran, 'Material life and domestic economy in a frontier of the Oyo empire during the mid-Atlantic age', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 42:3 (2009), 351–86.

[12] C. R. DeCorse, *An Archaeology of Elmina: Africans and Europeans on the Gold Coast, 1400–1900* (Washington, DC, 2001). See also G. Chouin and C. R. DeCorse, 'Prelude to the Atlantic trade: new perspectives on southern Ghana's pre-Atlantic history (800–1500)', *Journal of African History*, 51:2 (2010), 123–45.

[13] N. Swanepoel, A. Esterhuysen, and P. Bonner (eds.), *Five Hundred Years Rediscovered: Southern African Precedents and Prospects* (Johannesburg, 2009).

[14] J. Denbow, 'Archaeology and history', in Falola and Jennings, *Sources and Methods*, 5.

[15] P. Lane, 'Environmental narratives and the history of soil erosion in Kondoa district, Tanzania: an archaeological perspective', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 42:3 (2009), 459.

[16] Although see D. Phillipson, *Ancient Ethiopia: Aksum: its Antecedents and Successors* (London, 1998).

[17] P. R. Schmidt, M. C. Curtis and Z. Teka (eds.), *The Archaeology of Ancient Eritrea* (Trenton, NJ, 2008).

[18] See Y. Libsekal, 'Eritrea', in *International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS): World Report 2001–02 on Monuments and Sites in Danger* (Paris, 2002), http://www.international.icomos.org/risk/2001/erit2001.htm (accessed 10 April 2011).

reference points,[19] a younger generation has pushed on. David Schoenbrun's work, for example, demonstrates how historical and comparative linguistics can be used to piece together complex social relations and the making and remaking of communities in the Great Lakes area, and how signs, symbols, and performances, traceable to the deep (pre-fifteenth century) past, continue to have rich meanings today.[20] Rhiannon Stephens has shown how in the Ugandan region lineage was a matter of continual negotiation in social formation, and how ideas about motherhood were central to social cohesion and political authority – issues of enduring and contemporary significance.[21] At the same time, Jan Bender Shetler's work on local relationships with, and memories of, landscape in Tanzania speaks eloquently to the very contemporary need to incorporate African voices in developmental and conservationist enterprises that frequently exclude them; local people, after all, know their own land – its potential as well as its limitations, in the deeper past as in more recent times. Shetler expresses the hope that her methodology – the use of linguistics and oral tradition – will 'reinvigorate the study of precolonial African societies and the discussion about oral tradition as history'.[22]

Each of these scholars – and there are others[23] – embraces a *longue durée* approach to African history, tracing change and continuity, and identifying the factors driving both, over several centuries; in different ways, each demonstrates the utility of historical linguistics in the reconstruction of both the socioeconomic and the political past over an extended timeframe. Even more than archaeologists, however, they have cause to be concerned about their isolation vis-à-vis other branches of the discipline, particularly in view of the hegemony of the modern. Arguably, indeed, even their fellow 'precolonialists', keen on texts and traditions but less enthusiastic about lexicostatistics or glottochronology, behold them with some apprehension,

[19] J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (London, 1990); J. Vansina, 'New linguistic evidence and "the Bantu Expansion"', *Journal of African History*, 36:2 (1995), 173–95; J. Vansina, *How Societies are Born: Governance in West Central Africa Before 1600* (Charlottesville and London, 2004); D. Nurse, 'The contribution of linguistics to the study of history in Africa', *Journal of African History*, 38:3 (1997), 359–91.

[20] D. L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, a Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Oxford, 1998); see also D. L. Schoenbrun, *The Historical Reconstruction of Great Lakes Bantu Cultural Vocabulary: Etymologies and Distributions* (Cologne, 1997).

[21] R. Stephens, 'A history of motherhood, food procurement and politics in east-central Uganda to the nineteenth century' (unpublished PhD thesis, Northwestern University, 2007); also R. Stephens, 'Lineage and society in pre-colonial Uganda', *Journal of African History*, 50:2 (2009), 203–21.

[22] J. B. Shetler, *Imagining Serengeti: A History of Landscape Memory in Tanzania from Earliest Times to the Present* (Athens, OH, 2007), 24.

[23] For example, K. Bostoen, 'Pots, words and the Bantu problem: on lexical reconstruction and early African history', *Journal of African History*, 48:2 (2007), 173–99; E. L. Fields-Black, 'Untangling the many roots of West African mangrove rice farming: rice technology in the Rio Nunez region, earliest times to *c.*1800', *Journal of African History*, 49:1 (2008), 1–22; K. A. Klieman, '*The Pygmies were our Compass*': *Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa, Early Times to c.1900* (Portsmouth, NH, 2003).

interested in their conclusions but not always entirely trustful (or indeed comprehending) of the means by which they arrive at them.

Research based on the documentary record in turn produces particular kinds of work and, although it is no straightforward task to impose structure on this body of scholarship, certain germane themes are identifiable. Arguably, the larger proportion of work on the precolonial past is now concerned with the Atlantic slave trade and its aftermath – also of interest, as we have seen, to historical archaeologists. Limitations on space prevent anything approaching a comprehensive survey of this material, but certain salient features fit with the broad thesis presented here. John Thornton's work deals with African agency in the making of the 'Atlantic world', now a discrete field of study, and proposes that Africans were not passive participants in a Europe-driven economy but were in many respects the shapers and controllers of that economic system[24] – although not all Thornton's fellow Atlanticists accept his argument regarding the level of African agency.[25] On the West African coast itself, meanwhile, Robin Law, Paul Lovejoy, and David Richardson have in their different ways depicted African agency through micro-studies of both places – Ouidah, Bonny, and Old Calabar – and practices, namely pawnship and credit.[26] In the mid-1990s, work on the 'legitimate commerce' that gradually supplanted slave trade – again by Law, and by Martin Lynn – likewise illuminated the local workings of global trade. Ultimately, such research has implications for understandings of West Africa's long-term economic development: work by Law and others made clear that the nineteenth-century transition marked the onset of the region's modern economic history in terms of its relationship with Europe and North America,[27] while Lynn demonstrated that the gradual erosion of African brokers' power led to 'restructuring', commercial crisis, and, by century's close, conquest.[28]

Indeed, it is the long-term impact of the slave trade and the economic order that followed it that constitutes one of the central concerns of what Tony Hopkins has termed 'the new economic history of Africa'.[29] At least in part, the debate surrounding the deeper roots of African underdevelopment

[24] J. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, 1998).

[25] Recently, for example, see S. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge MA, 2007); and, over a rather longer *durée*, the work of Joseph Miller.

[26] R. C. C. Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African slaving 'port', 1727–1892* (Oxford, 2004). Important articles by Lovejoy and Richardson are 'Trust, pawnship and Atlantic history: the institutional foundations of the Old Calabar slave trade', *American Historical Review*, 102 (1999), 332–55; 'The business of slaving: pawnship in western Africa, *c.*1600–1810', *Journal of African History*, 42:1 (2001), 67–89; and '"This horrid hole": royal authority, commerce and credit at Bonny, 1690–1840', *Journal of African History*, 45:3 (2004), 363–92. Several articles in *Journal of African History*, 42:1 (2001) dealt with the slave trade and 'decentralized' societies.

[27] R. C. C. Law (ed.), *From Slave Trade to 'Legitimate' Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-century West Africa* (Cambridge, 1995).

[28] M. Lynn, *Commerce and Economic Change in West Africa: The Palm Oil Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1997).

[29] A. G. Hopkins, 'The new economic history of Africa', *Journal of African History*, 50:2 (2009), 155–77.

has been inspired by the Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 'reversal of fortune' thesis, which proposes (in crude summary) that European colonization around the globe over the past five centuries has meant that some of the world's poorest regions in *c*.1500 are today among its richest, and vice versa.[30] The central idea has been applied to Africa by Nathan Nunn, who – using economic modelling and a synthesis of scholarship on slave numbers and local population levels – argues that Africa's underdevelopment is indeed rooted in the slave trades and the extractive colonial economies that followed these.[31] Gareth Austin, while welcoming the assessment of growth theories against long-term history, and the collaboration of development economists and economic historians, has expressed reservations about the utility of the 'reversal of fortune' thesis in the African context – not least because of the oversimplification produced by the 'compression' of different historical periods, and the quality of the evidence, especially for the earlier centuries.[32]

Regardless of one's position in the debate, the debate itself has demonstrated the exciting potential for new models, and interdisciplinary collaboration, to elucidate problems of long-term development, and for considering the deeper historical roots of current economic malaises. Austin himself has offered a nuanced assessment of the role of factor endowments in African economic history over the long term, arguing that, while land abundance and labour scarcity are indeed in evidence, 'dynamics and paths of long-term innovation and development' are also clearly discernible – in contrast to standard 'Afropessimist' interpretations.[33] In the hard-headed world of development policy, unconcerned with the words and things of antiquity, this, at least, is surely one branch of long-term history that merits attention.

Nor is such contemporary relevance confined to the Atlantic world. In eastern Africa, too, work on slavery and the slave trade – by Deutsch and by Medard and Doyle – suggests much about how ideas of servitude, class, and underdevelopment have endured into the modern era.[34] Socioeconomic change has been explored in other ways, too: Stephen Rockel's focus on the commercial culture of nineteenth-century Tanzania argues for the

[30] For example, D. Acemoglu, S. Johnson, and J. Robinson, 'Reversal of fortune: geography and institutions in the making of the modern world income distribution', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 117:4 (2002), 1231–94.

[31] N. Nunn, 'Historical legacies: a model linking Africa's past to its current underdevelopment', *Journal of Development Economics*, 83 (2007), 157–75; N. Nunn, 'The long term effects of Africa's slave trades', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 23 (2008), 139–72; and see also C. Monga, 'Commodities, Mercedes-Benz and structural adjustment: an episode in West African economic history', in E. Akyeampong (ed.), *Themes in West Africa's History* (Athens, OH, 2006), 227–64.

[32] G. Austin, 'The "reversal of fortune" thesis and the compression of history: perspectives from African and comparative history', *Journal of International Development*, 20 (2008), 996–1027.

[33] G. Austin, 'Resources, techniques, and strategies south of the Sahara: revising the factor endowments perspective on Africa economic development, 1500–2000', *Economic History Review*, 61:3 (2008), 587.

[34] J.-G. Deutsch, *Emancipation Without Abolition in German East Africa, c.1884–1914* (Oxford, 2006); H. Médard and S. Doyle (eds.), *Slavery in the Great Lakes Region of East Africa* (Oxford, 2007).

emergence of a distinctive 'class' of porters, composed of highly mobile communities, that learnt how to use its economic muscle and was remarkably self-aware by the late nineteenth century.[35] These porters formed part of a vast and burgeoning Indian Ocean zone of interaction, as did the port of Massawa on the Red Sea, the focus of a study by Jonathan Miran, who demonstrates how vital were the commercial and religious forces in forging new urban communities and far-flung networks of trade and culture – both westwards into Sudan and east across the Red Sea itself – which have continued to develop through the twentieth century.[36] The enduring importance of similarly long-distance relationships and cultures has been demonstrated for the Saharan world by Ghislaine Lydon, who has also shown how important the role of law was in the organization of commerce where state structures were absent.[37]

Work continues to be done on power and attendant political cultures, often from a distinctively materialist perspective. Jean-Francois Bayart argued for the 'historicity of the African state' and that modern African politics must be understood as the product of distinctive patterns of governance evolving over the long term, not merely as the outcome of postcolonial malaise or the failure of modernity.[38] The need to trace political processes deep into Africa's past remains as vital today as when Bayart first made the argument more than twenty years ago. Research of this kind has been possible for states that developed especially rich literary cultures from the late nineteenth century onward, and those with particularly carefully retrieved oral traditions. Indeed, in this sense, professional historians have followed in the footsteps of colonial ethnographers, who were fascinated by many of the same kingdoms for many of the same reasons. Buganda (after two decades in which new work on Uganda was all but impossible) has been the focus of a cluster of studies that include Holly Hanson's monograph on the patterns of power relations in Buganda,[39] Henri Medard's study of Ganda political and economic systems,[40] Neil Kodesh's work on clanship,[41] and my own assessment of the material basis of the centralized state.[42] In their different ways, these authors have contributed – whether consciously or otherwise – to an understanding of the durability of a precolonial system of authority, and of the material underpinnings of that authority, in the colonial and postcolonial eras. Buganda continues to dominate the political arena in Uganda, while the

[35] S. Rockel, *Carriers of Culture: Labor on the Road in Nineteenth-century East Africa* (Portsmouth, NH, 2006).

[36] J. Miran, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2009).

[37] G. Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks and Cross-cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-century Western Africa* (Cambridge, 2009).

[38] J.-F. Bayart, *L'état en Afrique: la politique du ventre* (Paris, 1989), translated as *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (London, 1993). See also his 'Africa in the world: a history of extraversion', *African Affairs*, 99:395 (2000), 217–67.

[39] H. Hanson, *Landed Obligation: The Practice of Power in Buganda* (Portsmouth, NH, 2003).

[40] H. Medard, *Le Royaume du Buganda au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 2007).

[41] N. Kodesh, *Beyond the Royal Gaze: Clanship and Public Healing in Buganda* (Charlottesville, 2010).

[42] R. J. Reid, *Political Power in Pre-colonial Buganda: Economy, Society and Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2002).

kingdom's 'promotion of culture' agenda has in fact involved the reiteration of a historical narrative. Indeed, it is by no means unproblematic that Buganda receives quite the level of attention it does from foreign researchers, for in such a competitive and currently volatile political space – in which precolonial entities vie with the state – academic work becomes, if unwittingly, politicized.

Others focused on the more abstract elements of political culture in similarly centralized, territorial states for which the documentary (and material) record was comparatively rich. Tom McCaskie's work on Asante in West Africa in the mid-1990s, notably, was the culmination of many years' rumination on the culture and indeed philosophy of authority in this much-scrutinized kingdom.[43] Asante's documentary, material, and oral source-base was dense enough to support this kind of reconstruction – it is no coincidence that the reward for close and prolonged proximity to Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has often been highly sophisticated scholarly analysis in the late twentieth – though in truth few other polities outside the Ethiopian Highlands have left a comparable range of sources from which to work. McCaskie's argument that the Asante kingdom was all but destroyed in the 1880s, and that there was therefore significant discontinuity between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, drew a sceptical response from Ivor Wilks[44] – and there is clearly a great deal more scope for work on the survival, in whatever form, of precolonial polities into the twentieth century and beyond, their internal power structures as well as their relationships with the states within which they are enclosed.

This is certainly true of the Zulu in southern Africa, where, since the turmoil of the *mfecane* debate in the late 1980s and early 1990s,[45] there has been a reconsideration of the meanings and interpretations of Shaka and Zulu identity. Carolyn Hamilton, for example, shows how Shaka's image has been shaped and reshaped throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – and argues that this is not simply a matter of cynical manipulation but the product of indigenous notions of sovereignty and perceptions of colonial rule.[46] Dan Wylie's 'anti-biography', meanwhile, has laid out in considerable detail what we *do* know about Shaka, and what we do not, and represents an exhaustive trawl through the available sources, oral and archival.[47] Shaka, of course, is one of the centrepieces of 'Zuluism' or 'Zuluness', the subject of a hefty collection of essays under the stewardship of Carton, Laband, and Sithole.[48] The arguments contained in this wide-ranging exploration of the evolution of Zulu ethnicity and identity defy summary, but it is worth noting the thesis that a distinctive Zulu ethnic identity did not emerge until the early twentieth century, and the discussion of the ways in which nineteenth-century warrior imagery has been exploited by modern politicians and

[43] T. C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-colonial Asante* (Cambridge, 1995).

[44] I. Wilks, 'Asante state and society', *Journal of African History*, 37:1 (1996), 138–40.

[45] See C. Hamilton (ed.), *The Mfecane Aftermath: Reconstructive Debates in Southern African History* (Johannesburg, 1995).

[46] C. Hamilton, *Terrific Majesty: The Powers of Shaka Zulu and the Limits of Historical Invention* (Cape Town, 1998).

[47] D. Wylie, *Myth of Iron: Shaka in History* (Scottsville, 2006).

[48] B. Carton, J. Laband and J. Sithole (eds.), *Zulu Identities: Being Zulu, Past and Present* (Pietermaritzburg, 2008).

designers of theme parks alike. More broadly, the new *Cambridge History of South Africa* represents the outcome of a period of reflection, indicative of a search for fresh (or at least consolidated) perspectives on the back of a turbulent recent past.[49] A major work of interpretive synthesis on South Africa's deep past, it is the first of its kind since majority rule.

Elsewhere, in eastern and central Africa, late twentieth-century trauma has also prompted a degree of historical reflection. Here, the backdrop has been the genocide of the mid-1990s, and work on authority and ethnic identity has been regarded as a matter of some urgency, given the suffering experienced by millions of Rwandans, Burundians, and eastern Congolese over the last twenty years. Work by Jean-Pierre Chretien and René Lemarchand – each with the benefit of several decades' research – has sought to place the violence of the late twentieth century in long-term perspectives.[50] Both argue that escalating ethnic competition in the nineteenth century was further exacerbated by the irruption of the colonial state in the early twentieth; similar theses are laid out by two other long-time scholars of Rwanda, David Newbury and Jan Vansina, in studies more firmly rooted in the precolonial past.[51] Vansina, however, is rather more forthright in his revisionism, notably in rejecting the idea of successive migrations into the area – labels were slow to develop and were applied to people already in Rwanda – and in depicting the modern cultural and linguistic unity of Rwanda as rooted in the expansion of the Nyiginya kingdom from the 1850s onward. Both authors make clear the need to unravel modern cycles of propaganda and myth; one can only echo David Schoenbrun's hope that Vansina's book might be translated into Kinyarwanda.[52]

Finally, mention might be made of environment – both 'built' and otherwise. Urban history has for a number of years been one of the central foci of the new colonial historiography; but attention has also been paid to pre-1900 urban formations, as historians and archaeologists both search for the roots of African urbanism and its peculiar features, and also use the urban environment to examine sociopolitical relations in flux and (often) at their most intense.[53] Scholars working in this field have argued that we need to understand the precolonial roots of African urbanism in order fully to understand the continent's urban present.[54] Urban history has clearly been a field in which historians and archaeologists share much in the way of interests and

[49] C. Hamilton, B. K. Mbenga and R. Ross (eds.), *The Cambridge History of South Africa, Vol. 1: From Early Times to 1885* (Cambridge, 2010).

[50] J.-P. Chretien, *L'Afrique des grands lacs: deux milles ans d'histoire* (Paris, 2000), translated as *The Great Lakes of Africa: Two Thousand Years of History* (New York, 2003); R. Lemarchand, *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa* (Philadelphia, 2009).

[51] D. Newbury, *The Land Beyond the Mists: Essays on Identity and Authority in Precolonial Congo and Rwanda* (Athens, OH, 2009); J. Vansina, *Le Rwanda ancien: le royaume nyiginya* (Paris, 2001), translated as *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya Kingdom* (Madison, 2004).

[52] See D. Schoenbrun's review of Vansina, *Antecedents*, in *Africa Today*, 52:4 (2006), 146–9.

[53] D. M. Anderson and R. Rathbone (eds.), *Africa's Urban Past* (Oxford, 2000); A. Burton (ed.), *The Urban Experience in Eastern Africa, c.1750–2000* (Nairobi, 2002).

[54] See D. M. Anderson and R. Rathbone, 'Urban Africa: histories in the making', in Anderson and Rathbone, *Africa's Urban Past*, 1–17.

sources; and, just as the 'built environment' has become increasingly relevant, so land use and the environment more broadly have demanded serious attention. For example, Donald Crummey's work on the Ethiopian Highlands demonstrates how patterns of social inequality can be traced back over seven centuries by examining land tenure: Crummey emphasizes 'the centrality of agricultural and pastoral production to the material construction' of Ethiopia, and thus foregrounds class, rather than ethnicity, in his interpretation of internal division over the long term.[55] Jim McCann's study of ox-plough cultivation in Ethiopia over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has revealed agricultural innovation as well as vulnerability, and makes the case for an 'ecological revolution' that has determined divisions of labour, property rights, and land use.[56] The lessons of the Ethiopian story concern the need for a more nuanced understanding of rural society; for the kingdom of Bunyoro, the story is a warning of the consequences of neglect, as demonstrated in Shane Doyle's study of environment and demography between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries.[57] Modern political conditions in western Uganda can only be grasped once a century of environmental instability and economic marginalization is taken into account.

THE BIG BANG OF MODERNITY

The foregoing discussion makes clear that precolonial history is neither dead nor does it lack – by any stretch of the imagination – the potential to reach into new areas of enquiry. Nevertheless, however cursory this survey of recent scholarship might be, nothing similar could be attempted, at least not in so few words, for colonial or postcolonial historiography, such is the volume of material by comparison. It is perfectly true, of course, that there were valid reasons for the shift in interest to the colonial era in the course of the 1970s and 1980s. New questions needed to be asked of the nature and impact of European rule, not least in terms of the problems that were suddenly evident in independent Africa, many of which were at least partially rooted in the colonial experience. However, the growing conviction that the colonial experience had engendered identities and processes that were not connected – or only tenuously so – to anything that had gone before meant that the deep past was increasingly relegated to mere prologue. Since the 1980s, what began as a series of legitimate lines of scholarly enquiry has become a dominant intellectual worldview; the obsession with the modern has led to the marginalization of the deep past, which means in effect that historians are increasingly fixated with the tip at the expense of the iceberg.[58]

My aim here is to assess two key themes in relation to the dominance of 'modern' history. First, the issue of ethnicity illustrates the hegemony of the

[55] D. Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia: From the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (Oxford, 2000), 259.

[56] J. C. McCann, *People of the Plow: An Agricultural History of Ethiopia, 1800–1990* (Madison, 1995).

[57] S. Doyle, *Crisis and Decline in Bunyoro: Population and Environment in Western Uganda 1860–1955* (Oxford, 2006).

[58] Anxieties about the encroachment of presentism on the discipline of history have been expressed in other quarters in recent years: see, for example, J. C. D. Clark, *Our Shadowed Present: Modernism, Postmodernism and History* (London, 2003), 5–9.

recent past in African studies very effectively. Between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s, a University of Pennsylvania Press series concerned with 'ethnohistory' over the *longue durée* produced several important contributions to precolonial African history. These included Lee Cassanelli's study of the Somali, Derek Nurse and Tom Spear's exploration of the emergence of Swahili culture, and Ronald Atkinson's monograph on the pre-nineteenth-century roots of the Acholi.[59] Each of these posited the existence of distinct 'ethnic' or cultural-linguistic identities over a markedly long timeframe, in each case several centuries, and described in some detail the remarkable social and political achievements of these groups as they changed over time. They were all concerned to demonstrate the pre-twentieth century roots of ethnicity: change and fluidity were much in evidence, as was the nature of human communities, but for the Swahili, the Somali, and the Acholi, a distinctive canon of attributes, cultures, and behaviours had emerged three to four centuries before the twentieth. Atkinson argued against 'an overwhelmingly twentieth-century orientation' in then-burgeoning discussions of ethnicity.[60]

At the same time, Chretien and Prunier, among others, were making a similar case in the Francophone context: it was too easily forgotten, they suggested, that ethnicity was frequently a long-term historical process.[61] However, they were already swimming against the tide, because the mainstream interpretation was of ethnicity as a distinctly modern phenomenon – at least in its fixed, political sense. The basic argument is that, in precolonial Africa, 'ethnicity' was not clear-cut, or only rarely so, in terms of language, culture, and political boundaries; rather, such identities were plural, overlapping, simultaneous, and characterized by considerable mobility. Professions of identification or loyalty were wholly contingent on context and current circumstances. Only during colonial rule was ethnicity in its modern rigid form 'invented' – first through the European creation of 'tribes' to whom it was assumed that Africans belonged, immutably, and then through African appropriation of such identities, for various reasons. There is no reason to doubt, as Iliffe put it in relation to Tanganyika, that 'The notion of tribe lay at the heart of indirect rule';[62] the work on Rwanda noted earlier demonstrates this clearly enough. Nevertheless, it is this colonial 'imagining' that has blinded us to the very real possibilities of premodern links to the present, and to very real continuities in African identities from the precolonial past. In other words, we cannot possibly appreciate the true extent of invention without first launching more vigorous investigations into the precolonial past, which has been all but forgotten in the clamour to make analysis of colonialism ever more sophisticated and to attribute to it ever more nuanced power.

[59] L. V. Cassanelli, *The Shaping of Somali Society: Reconstructing the History of a Pastoral People, 1600–1900* (Philadelphia, 1982); D. Nurse and T. Spear, *The Swahili: Reconstructing the History and Language of an African Society 800–1500* (Philadelphia, 1985); R. R. Atkinson, *The Roots of Ethnicity: The Origins of the Acholi of Uganda Before 1800* (Philadelphia, 1994).

[60] Atkinson, *Roots*, xiii.

[61] J.-P. Chretien and G. Prunier (eds.), *Les ethnies ont une histoire* (Paris, 1989).

[62] J. Iliffe, *A Modern History of Tanganyika* (Cambridge, 1979), 323.

There is clearly much of merit in the 'instrumentalist' school, and some of the core assertions are irrefutable.[63] Its tenets are persuasive in many contexts, for example, among the Maasai in Kenya,[64] and in the Horn of Africa more generally since the mid-twentieth century.[65] But where reasonably clear precolonial identities do exist, with discernible genealogies traceable back to long before the onset of colonial rule, and with distinctive and cohesive cultural, linguistic, and political heritages, they are presented as the exceptions and anomalies rather than the rule. Crawford Young concedes that 'Buganda and Bunyoro were large precolonial states whose political identity readily translated into ethnic ideology'; but he is more interested in those communities 'imagined' by the British in Uganda – Acholi, Madi, Bugisu, Kiga, Teso.[66] In other words, political scientists and historians alike have been much more excited by what colonialism 'imagined' and 'invented' than by what already existed – and often, indeed, than by the multifaceted question of African agency itself. Moreover, shifting or multiple identities – ethnic flux – do not in themselves weaken the power that any particular identity might have had at a given point in time; it also does not suggest that there is necessarily no continuity between the precolonial and colonial eras. Frederick Cooper might, no doubt correctly, write admiringly of Sharon Hutchinson's critique of Evans-Pritchard's formulaic study of the Nuer, and suggest that 'People could live with shadings – and continued to do so day by day, even when political lines were drawn.'[67] However, the recent tendency to muddy the precolonial waters, and to ascribe to African lives a bewildering degree of complexity, almost seems to represent an over-compensation vis-à-vis earlier simplifications. Complexity is *de rigueur*; African agency is Byzantine; fuzzy is fashionable, just as attempting to reach into the deeper precolonial past for clarity as regards the present is not. Ultimately, processes of 'identity formation' and resultant 'social action' are firmly rooted in the modern, usually colonial, era – acts of creativity made possible only with the encroachment of modernity.

It is a broad interpretation that has already come under scrutiny, not least from Ranger, who, a decade after *The Invention of Tradition*,[68] critiqued his own original thesis by suggesting that the notion of 'invention' was misleading and a gross oversimplification of the process that unfolded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[69] Mamdani has expressed

[63] See also C. Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven and London, 1994), 232ff.

[64] T. Spear and R. Waller (eds.), *Being Maasai: Ethnicity and Identity in East Africa* (Oxford, 1993).

[65] J. Markakis, 'Ethnic conflict and the state in the Horn of Africa', in K. Fukui and J. Markakis (eds.), *Ethnicity and Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (London, 1994), 217–37.

[66] Young, *African Colonial State*, 234.

[67] F. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, 2005), 79–80.

[68] T. Ranger, 'The invention of tradition in colonial Africa', in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), 211–62.

[69] T. Ranger, 'The invention of tradition revisited: the case of Africa', in T. Ranger and O. Vaughan (eds.), *Legitimacy and the State in Twentieth-century Africa* (London, 1993), 62–111.

scepticism, too,[70] while Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz have argued that 'What matters historically … is not so much the colonial roots of today's ethnic groups but the deeper processes by which their sedimentation took place, from pre-colonial times to the present'. Thus, for example, Hutu or Kikuyu ethnic identities need to be understood across a much longer time-frame, not simply understood as colonial 'inventions'; and, crucially, 'The fact that some ethnic groups were more creatively invented during colonial rule than others does not in and of itself make them any more or less genuine, or legitimate, than others.'[71] Spear has likewise warned against ignoring precolonial processes in the formation of ethnicity, in a wide-ranging article on the limits of 'invention' in the colonial context.[72]

Beyond African studies, there is inspiration to be gained from the literature on 'ethnosymbolism' and the ethnic origins of modern nations, dealing, for example, with enduring cultural reference points and political philosophies over the long term. Precolonial historians need not be primordialists when it comes to ethnicity or anything else; but the long-termism of much scholarship on nationalism elsewhere demonstrates that Africanists need not be overly anxious about looking for the roots of certain modern political and cultural communities in the deeper past.[73]

Similarly foreshortening tendencies can be espied in the study of conflict, and again the relative scarcity of work on Africa's precolonial violence is symptomatic of the larger phenomenon of privileging the modern. In a recent anthology of writing on precolonial African war, edited by John Lamphear, the vast bulk of the 22 contributions were published between 1971 and 1992; only three were as recent as the mid- to late 1990s.[74] By contrast, writing on contemporary violence has become a growth industry: work on current crises proliferates, but with little or no serious attempt made to historicize such conflict – excepting Rwanda, noted above, and to a lesser extent Darfur.[75]

War (naturally) has negative connotations, but this was especially true for African history in the 1960s and 1970s, when to focus on Africa's violent past was to recall the pessimistic and racially charged assessments of African culture and society in the late nineteenth century.[76] Moreover, the era of partition and 'pacification' had apparently placed precolonial war in a historical cul-de-sac, with spear-wielding savages firmly bricked up in the

[70] M. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, 1996), 185.

[71] P. Chabal and J.-P. Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Oxford, 1999), 57.

[72] T. Spear, 'Neo-traditionalism and the limits of invention in British colonial Africa', *Journal of African History*, 44:1 (2003), 16ff; and again see Schoenbrun, 'Conjuring the modern'.

[73] Lack of space prevents an extensive survey, but see A. Smith *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1986); and A. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford, 1999).

[74] J. Lamphear (ed.), *African Military History* (Aldershot, 2007).

[75] M. W. Daly, *Darfur's Sorrow: A History of Destruction and Genocide* (Cambridge, 2007); R. O. Collins, *A History of Modern Sudan* (Cambridge, 2008).

[76] J. Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa, 1500–1800* (London, 1999), 3; R. J. Reid, *War in Pre-colonial Eastern Africa: The Patterns and Meanings of State-level Conflict in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2007), 9–10.

basement of the colonial edifice. In any case, historians of Africa, in keeping with trends elsewhere, were interested in so-called 'bottom-up' history, and military history did not lend itself to this approach. Kings and commanders were out – with the exception of those who were briefly identified in the 1960s as denoting an earlier nation-building ethos, such as Mirambo of the Nyamwezi. Such heroes might serve a purpose, but rarely for long. Of course, there has indeed been some excellent scholarship on precolonial African warfare over the past forty years,[77] but this was subject matter that was rarely mainstream. In recent years, certainly since the second edition of Robert Smith's seminal monograph in 1989,[78] writing on war in the deep past has slowed to a trickle. Work by John Thornton – whose exhaustive study of warfare in western Africa demonstrates the possibilities, as well as the limitations, of the source material – and the author represents the exception.[79]

While the reluctance of many Africanists to tackle the violent past head on was politically understandable, it has had some unfortunate consequences. Not only does the whiff of Victorian misjudgement of African warfare and violent conflict more generally continue to linger – in some scholarly work, as well as in popular representation[80] – but the recent outpouring of literature on contemporary African conflict, namely in the 1990s and 2000s, is notable for its failure to historicize much of what is discussed. And studies of modern conflict do represent an impressive growth industry: a range of civil wars, low-level insurgencies, guerrilla and militia organizations, and the occasional interstate war have drawn the attention of historians and, rather more commonly, political scientists and anthropologists. Sudan and the Horn of Africa have figured particularly prominently, as have various forms of violent conflict in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Congo. Some of this work has been first rate both in the detail of the analysis and in the attempt at modelling, and has pushed forward the frontiers of our understanding of contemporary conflict in Africa.[81] What is striking about the bulk of this literature, however, is its

[77] For example, J. F. Ade Ajayi and R. Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (Ibadan and Cambridge, 1971); B. A. Ogot (ed.), *War and Society in Africa* (London, 1972); G. N. Uzoigwe, 'Pre-colonial military studies in Africa', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 13:3 (1975), 469–81; R. C. C. Law, 'Horses, firearms, and political power in pre-colonial West Africa', *Past & Present*, 72 (1976), 112–32; A. A. Mazrui (ed.), *The Warrior Tradition in Modern Africa* (Leiden, 1977); L. Kaba, 'Archers, musketeers, and mosquitoes: the Moroccan invasion of the Sudan and the Songhay resistance (1591–1612)', *Journal of African History*, 22:4 (1981), 457–75; J. Thornton, 'The art of war in Angola, 1575–1680', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30 (1988), 360–78; C. Hamilton, '"The character and objects of Chaka": a reconsideration of the making of Shakaa as "Mfecane" motor', *Journal of African History*, 33:1 (1992), 37–63; J. Lamphear, 'Brothers in arms: military aspects of East African age–class systems in historical perspective', in E. Kurimoto and S. Simonse (eds.), *Conflict, Age and Power in North East Africa* (Oxford, 1998), 79–97.

[78] R. S. Smith, *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-colonial West Africa* (London, 1989).

[79] Thornton, *Warfare*; Reid, *War*; R. J. Reid, *Frontiers of Violence in Northeast Africa: Genealogies of Conflict Since 1800* (Oxford, 2011).

[80] See for example J. Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London, 1993); R. D. Kaplan, 'The coming anarchy', *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994, 44–76.

[81] A representative sample might include C. Clapham (ed.), *African Guerrillas* (Oxford, 1998); W. Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder, 1998); M. Boas and K. C. Dunn (eds.), *African Guerrillas: Raging Against the Machine* (Boulder, 2007);

tendency to frame conflict – and the 'state collapse' that often attends it – in a determinedly presentist framework, and to consider war a 'modern' problem. In the Horn, for example, the dramas of the late twentieth century have sidelined those of earlier periods – inexplicably, for much contemporary conflict is rooted in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – and in marked contrast to the academic response to genocide in central Africa. Scholars are surely correct, in the broadest terms, to highlight economic inequity and sharp sociopolitical competitions, both local and global, in driving much of this violence. Where issue might be taken, however, is with the underpinning notion that all this is part of a larger *postcolonial* malaise that needs to be diagnosed and treated at the earliest possible opportunity.

It is the failure or misuse of the accoutrements of modernity that is to blame. This position exaggerates, whether by inference or more explicitly, the significance of the colonial moment – important though this clearly was in many respects – at the expense of deeper, *African* historical dynamics; it is an oddly ahistorical approach to a set of issues that by implication eschews the historical logic evident in other parts of the globe, not least Europe – namely, that war and various forms of violent upheaval over the long term are critical in driving political, social, and economic innovation, however unpalatable that innovation might appear at any given moment. Not only can it be argued that much of Africa's current violence is traceable to at least the nineteenth century, but it is also the case that the desperate search for immediate solutions on the part of external actors, well intended but frequently wrongheaded, denies the deeper historical significance of conflict, the awful human tragedy associated with it notwithstanding. Here, again, we find that precolonial research is viewed as irrelevant; presentist and solution-oriented research agendas are hegemonic, and Africa's troubled present is severed from its violent deeper past. The two urgently need to be reattached.

An article of this kind can never be – nor was this one intended to be – exhaustive in its discussion of published material, but only illustrative. Suffice to say here that work in other fields – in the history of the Atlantic slave trade and of Indian Ocean cultures[82] – broadly supports the analysis presented here; likewise studies of spirituality and of healing.[83] The evolution of political culture,[84] of religious belief, of cultural expression and identity; economic growth (and shrinkage); the forms and drivers of

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P. Richards (ed.), *No Peace, No War: An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts* (Oxford, 2005); P. Kaarsholm (ed.), *Violence, Political Culture and Development in Africa* (Oxford, 2006); B. Derman, R. Odgaard, and E. Sjaastad (eds.), *Conflicts Over Land and Water in Africa* (Oxford, 2007); A. Nhema and P. Tiyambe Zeleza (eds.), *The Roots of African Conflicts: The Causes and Costs* (Oxford and Addis Ababa, 2008); A. Nhema and P. Tiyambe Zeleza (eds.), *The Resolution of African Conflicts: The Management of Conflict Resolution and Post-conflict Reconstruction* (Oxford, 2008); T. M. Ali and R. O. Matthews (eds.), *Civil Wars in Africa: Roots and Resolution* (Montreal and Kingston, 1999).

[82] B. Barry, *La Senegambie du XVe au XIXe siecle: traite négriére, Islam et conquete coloniale* (Paris, 1988), translated as *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1998); P. M. Larson, *Ocean of Letters: Language and Creolization in an Indian Ocean Diaspora* (Cambridge, 2009).

[83] J. and J. Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago, 1993); Schoenbrun, 'Conjuring the modern'.

[84] Again, see Bayart, *The State in Africa*.

organized violence: all may be elucidated by studies of the precolonial past. Meanwhile, Africa's supposedly dysfunctional modernity has coincided with the eclipse of the precolonial and the hegemony of the modern in terms of the scholarly and indeed political research agenda. It is by no means suggested here that Africa's political and economic malaise over the last four decades is the result of a shift in scholarly interest from the pre-modern to the modern; that would be ludicrous, of course. However, it is decidedly *not* so ludicrous to suggest that research agendas in Africa itself have similarly been characterized by a neglect of the deeper past, and that a concern with modernity and its trappings has led to a certain myopia in the perennial search for 'African solutions to African problems'.

REFLECTIONS: SUCCESSES, FAILURES, AND PROSPECTS

The expansion of colonial studies more broadly is symptomatic of the era of post-imperial self-reflection. Western scholars' research interests have tended – not in all cases, but in most – to reflect that era of self-reflection, and the trend has been to study those aspects of Africa's past that most closely connect with the West's own concerns. Thus there has been a shift toward the very recent past, the age of imperialism and its legacies – both at home and abroad – and a concern with the functioning and the export of 'modern' political, economic, and cultural equipment. What we might term 'Mau Mau syndrome' – the ongoing, apparently boundless, fascination with the Kenyan conflict of the 1950s – exemplifies the process: the focus on imperial violence, both physical and otherwise; the questions that the rebellion raises about African identities in the making; the implications for the postcolonial state. For every piece of research now done on the nineteenth century – arguably a 'golden age' in terms of African political and economic creativity – there are many more that are symptomatic of 'Mau Mau syndrome'. Meanwhile, there is not merely lack of interest in what the precolonial represented – it is, after all, only prologue to the main action – but active discomfort with it: it looks muddy, difficult to conceptualize and categorize, and often all rather violent, and not in a positive, constructive way, but in a cyclical, 'nasty, brutish, and short' kind of way. In any case, it is oddly irrelevant in respect of the developmental agendas that took centre stage in the course of the 1970s and 1980s and that have remained there ever since. Africa's deep past has, in effect, been detached from the challenges of the present. To some extent at least, the self-reflection of the post-imperial age has given rise to solution-driven agendas that have no place for the deep past. In this sense, deep history has become almost luxury, something that might be pondered in quieter moments but that is ultimately marginal to the real business of policy and solutions and the 'here and now'.

The issue of sources, again, inevitably comes to the fore; and there are, indeed, reasonable and legitimate concerns that need to be addressed. But the pessimism that frequently attends the discussion is unjustified – the work in historical archaeology and linguistics is perhaps the best demonstration of this – and there needs to be much more on the opportunities and rather less on the limitations. Of course, there are challenges: it is a dilemma, for example, that some of the areas with the richest source materials – the Slave Coast of West Africa in the eighteenth century, say, or the Great Lakes

region in the second half of the nineteenth – are also the regions with the biggest issues in terms of misrepresentation and manipulative imagery. Missionary correspondence notably exemplifies the problem: frequently rich in information, regular, and detailed, but loaded with judgement and distortion. Yet the self-analysis to which historians subject themselves every time they pick up a source is only useful insofar as it enables the historian to do the job at hand as rigorously and judiciously as possible: beyond that, the process is profoundly *un*helpful. A 'critical mass' of sources remains possible: the missionary writings, and other European texts, in combination with explicitly *historical* fieldwork interviews and, where available, earlier recorded 'traditions'; greater use of historical linguistics and archaeology; and all this in conjunction with ongoing reflection on the nature of the project of 'doing' African history, and a more systematic outreach into the world beyond African studies in search of inspiration. Sometimes, in some places, work on the deeper past will simply not be possible; that much is already clear. But there are other areas where investment will surely pay dividends, and the challenge now is how to recognize the limits of the available sources and yet still produce history.[85]

Considerable potential, too, is offered by developments in the embryonic field of African intellectual history.[86] Research on the purpose and practice of the deep past in African polity and society over the longer term – and in particular on its dwindling importance since the 1960s – would provide insights into the shifting fortunes of the discipline of history within Africa itself, and might indeed contribute – to end on a hopeful note – to its revival. Equally important, such a line of enquiry can only lead to the rejuvenation of the interaction between academics *in* Africa and those working *on* Africa – interaction that is absolutely essential if the field is to progress.

Meanwhile, half a century of serious scholarship has barely dented popular representation of Africa, nor has it achieved 'crossover' into mainstream media. In the era of TV history, the treatment of Africa's deeper past – at least outside the Valley of the Kings – is confined to Lalibela's stone churches or the Benin Bronzes; and such coverage is invariably overlaid with wonderment at achievements in antiquity, with presenters goggle-eyed at the stuff of legend or the crumbling remains of 'lost kingdoms'. Professional African historians are at least partly to blame for this: beyond the flattering temptations of the world of consultancy and policy, available to a few modern specialists, and the occasional media foray, Africanists have generally failed to make Africa either meaningful or accessible. Yet the perils of not doing so are significant, witness recent

[85] In recent years, there have been a number of publications exploring the methodologies and sources available to researchers: see T. Falola and C. Jennings (eds.), *Africanizing Knowledge: African Studies Across the Disciplines* (New Brunswick, 2002); Falola and Jennings, *Sources and Methods*; J. E. Philips (ed.), *Writing African History* (Rochester, 2005).

[86] C. C. Wrigley, *Kingship and State: The Buganda Dynasty* (Cambridge, 1996); B. Zewde, *Pioneers of Change in Ethiopia: The Reformist Intellectuals of the Early Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2002); D. Peterson and G. Macola (eds.), *Recasting the Past: History Writing and Political Work in Modern Africa* (Athens, OH, 2009).

'Afrocentric' historical literature that, in my view, has advanced in the vacuum left by serious research.[87]

Moreover, while there is currently a relative wealth of general surveys of the deeper past on the market, it remains to be seen, perhaps, whether any of these has the capacity to penetrate beyond the shared constituency of an Africanist readership, or whether they can compete with the more journalistic output of the trade publishers.[88] The 'lay reader', that elusive and charismatic figure, appears to prefer this material, and also the gripping yarns that are told and retold every few years, for example Philip Marsden on the Tewodros story,[89] or Saul David's account of another contemporaneous African 'tragedy', that of the Zulu in 1879.[90] In 2010, indeed, there were at least four new books on the Anglo-Zulu war,[91] albeit aimed primarily at British military history buffs rather than Africanists. It seems that the popular fascination with the strangely dignified but ultimately doomed nineteenth-century African warrior abides.

We need to rediscover the wider significance of precolonial history and to build safeguards against the presentism that too often foreshortens African history. It is vital to address the prevailing belief that, in effect, the only history worth doing in Africa is that of the twentieth century. States and peoples that were or are acknowledged as having existed on the eve of colonial rule are nonetheless too often overlooked in a scholarly world that lauds, in one way or another, colonial power and the power of 'modernity'. It may seek to explore and indeed celebrate African innovation within that system, but it is the system itself that is the backdrop to all such activity. The deep past remains critically important; the longer it is marginalized, the less healthy the body politic will become, and the more troubled the society in denial. 'Once the … grip of the past is loosened', wrote J. H. Plumb, 'a paralysis in social matters quickly sets in'[92] – and, one might add, hardening misapprehension of the roots of conflict, of political culture, of belief, of economic challenge. It may be a slow process, difficult to detect at any given moment, but in a world of historical uncertainties, that outcome at least is assured.

[87] See the work of Molefi K. Asante, notably *The History of Africa: The Quest for Harmony* (London, 2007); and, for a wide-ranging critique of the phenomenon, S. Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes* (London, 1998).

[88] Recent examples of journalistic output include G. Arnold, *Africa: A Modern History* (London, 2005); M. Meredith, *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence* (London, 2005); R. Dowden, *Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles* (London, 2008).

[89] P. Marsden, *The Barefoot Emperor: An Ethiopian Tragedy* (London, 2007).

[90] S. David, *Zulu: The Heroism and Tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879* (London, 2004).

[91] W. B. Bartlett, *Zulu: Queen Victoria's Most Famous Little War* (London, 2010); M. Snook, *How Can Man Die Better: The Secrets of Isandlwana Revealed* (London, 2010); M. Snook, *Like Wolves on the Fold: The Defence of Rorke's Drift* (London, 2010); I. Knight, *Zulu Rising: The Epic Story of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift* (London, 2010).

[92] J. H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (London, 1973), 49.