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## **The mountain has gone into labour: the UNESCO General history of Africa**

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## TRENDS IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

### THE MOUNTAIN HAS GONE INTO LABOUR

The UNESCO International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa. General History of Africa, vol. I, Methodology and African Pre-history, ed. J. Ki-Zerbo, Heinemann, UNESCO and the University of California Press, 1981, ISBN 0435 94807 5 (cased), 0435 94808 3 (paper); vol. II, Ancient Civilisations of Africa ed. G. Mokhtar, (same publishers), ISBN 0435 94805 9 (cased), 0435 94806 7 (paper).

There can be few projects in the study of history -or for that matter in the world out there- which are jointly sponsored by the Pope, Colonel Gaddafi and the Empress of Iran. The UNESCO general history of Africa, of which the first two volumes have recently appeared, has this unlikely combination of patrons. It cannot be said that they have spent their money wisely. It would be going too far to claim that the two volumes that have so far been published are unmitigated disasters. There are a number of useful surveys of, especially, the archeological data for various parts of Africa, and the studies of African physical geography, of early written sources, of the beginnings of modern African historiography and of the methods of oral tradition analysis are valuable as short introductions. In general, though, the articles are at once dogmatic and tendentious, while the heavy hand of editorial policy meant that, with the single exception of John Parkington, writing on the Southern African Late Stone Age for which he is taken to task by the editors, the fruitful interaction between ecology, ethnography and archeology is sacrificed to a rigidity of chronology which is out of place. In general it would seem as if the decade-and-a-half which passed between the inception of the project and the appearance of these volumes has given rise to such tensions between the original planning and the current state of the discipline that far too much of the project seems dated and strained.

This is perhaps not the place, nor am I the person, to give a full exposition of the various problems to which these volumes give rise. The *Journal of African History* pro-

vides a more suitable forum for this, and indeed the reviews that can be found in Volume XXIII (pp. 115-120, 1982) may be referred to for much searching criticism of the two volumes. Rather, I would like to address the question whether a general history of Africa is in principle possible. In other words, do the histories of the various parts of Africa have enough in common with each other to make the choosing of common themes under which the various distinct courses of events can be united a relatively simple, or at least a feasible matter?

For the relatively recent past the matter seems reasonably clear. To the extent that the history of late nineteenth and twentieth century Africa is dominated by the colonial presence, the unity of African history is evident. That domination was of course not complete. Nevertheless, a history of modern Africa written in terms of the increasing incorporation of Africa in the world economy and of the interaction between this process and the traditional cultures of the continent is at least feasible. Most aspects of life -political and religious as well as more strictly socio-economic- could thus be brought within a single framework. The attempts of nationalist African historians to see the colonial period as an essentially unimportant événement in the longue durée of African history have generally not been convincing. For local case-studies such a vision is not necessarily the most appropriate. It may well be that the particularity of local culture has to be stressed in a case-study of, for instance, the Lozi kingdom of western Zambia, in order to understand how colonialism was manipulated and effectively negated. Such a perspective would preclude a continent-wide study. But against this, it is certainly arguable that the representativeness and the meaning of such local studies can only be seen from the context in which they occur. Whether this is thought of as the country, the region or the continent is largely a matter of taste and erudition. But such an endeavour is certainly possible and indeed worthwhile. As is the case in other parts of the world, knowledge in African history increases very largely out of the counterpoint of scales.

When, however, attention is paid to the pre-colonial period, it is more difficult to see such overriding unities.

To what extent would the generalities be limited to those factors that made the eventual colonisation of virtually the whole of the African continent possible? The problem with doing this is that the analysis could only be in terms of those factors, of powerlessness and of desirability, that the African continent had in common with much of Asia, the Pacific and the Americas. Any general history that is limited to such themes would at once be so general and so selective as to be virtually meaningless.

At first sight, then, the only criterion to be used would be that of race, a highly dangerous and outmoded concept, although not one that has been avoided in these volumes. One of the more eccentric chapters is concerned to prove that the ancient Egyptians were of negroid extraction, a remarkably valueless undertaking. Rather more respectably, the general introduction to the volumes, written in superb French by J. Ki-Zerbo (it remains superb French even when translated faultlessly into English) attempts to expound the generalities of African history and its study. In this he has very largely to fall back on the study of oral tradition. All African history is of course limited by the fact that the written sources are rare, and do not cover more than the northern third of the continent before the sixteenth century. For this reason, the exegesis of oral tradition has developed far further in Africa than elsewhere in the world, although the exaggerated expectations of the 1960s have now been abandoned. Oral tradition is now more and more used to investigate the history of mentalités. But in these volumes the exaggerations are too often maintained, at least in some of the chapters. The result is that Africans are characterised as possessing particular attributes that distinguish them from the rest of mankind and which are common to the inhabitants of the continent. This is a highly dangerous assumption, one indeed which UNESCO in one of its earlier manifestations did much to combat. Nevertheless, in one evocative chapter, A. Hampaté Bâ describes the world of the traditional poets and sages he has known in the Sahel and Savanna regions of West Africa. As descriptions of the struggle within the minds of those torn between the old and the new learning it is superb. As an introduction to the historical use of oral tradition it is naive and uncritical.

The scientific study of oral tradition has its own methodology, set out in brief in a short chapter by Jan Vansina. One of these is that tradition is a very local matter, limited to the cultural contexts in which its metaphores are applicable. To see traditional history as a form of Pan-Africanism is entirely to misjudge its potential.

Even though the UNESCO histories do not provide any hope for the writing of a General History of Africa, it is at least conceivable that one could be constructed from a materialist perspective. This is not to say, this is necessarily the way to go about writing history -far from it- but rather that it seems the only method by which the pre-colonial history of at least sub-Saharan Africa can be brought into a single scheme. It would have been with the observation that the natural ecology of Africa, with the exceptions of the Mediterranean litoral, the Nile valley and the Ethiopian plateau, is remarkably undifferentiated. It consists very largely of desert, tropical savanna and tropical rain-forest. None of these environments is particularly conducive to high density agriculture, let alone to the combination of agriculture and stock keeping so important in Europe or to the river basin irrigation of the Asian agriculture heartlands. As a result, African population never built up, labour, not land, was generally the scarce factor and there was rarely any large agricultural surplus to allow an important non-agricultural elite to come into existence. With numerous local variations, because conditions are not quite that uniform and because the blue-prints of social structure were transferred from one area to another, the societies of sub-Saharan Africa all in their various ways had to cope with these basic limitations. A General History of Africa could be written from these perspectives, but certainly not by such a large and heterogenous team as contributes to the UNESCO history. This history then, as it stands, can have no other pretentions than those of a work of reference, a task which it does not manage to fulfil adequately, worthwhile though some of the chapters individually are.

## BOOKS

PAPERS OF THE DUTCH-INDONESIAN HISTORICAL CONFERENCE held at Lage Vuursche, the Netherlands, 23-27 June 1980, ed. Gerrit Schutte and Heather Sutherland, published by the Bureau of Indonesian Studies under the auspices of the Indonesian Studies Programme, Leiden/Jakarta, 1982, 1 vol., VII (unnumbered), 329 pp, no register; price f 20,-

With the exception of one paper published elsewhere, all (20) papers presented at the Third Dutch-Indonesian Historical Conference have been edited by Gerrit Schutte and Heather Sutherland and published with the assistance of the Bureau of Indonesian Studies. The papers were in differing degrees centered around two themes. The first and minor one, was *Historiography of Indonesia from 1945-1979*, drawing the attention of six writers covering subjects ranging from nation-formation as a problem in Indonesian historiography and historiography of the Indonesian Revolution to the nature of Priangan historiography and appellations for Muslim officials in Dutch historical sources.

The main theme, *Brokers and Middlemen in Indonesia in the Period of Dutch Colonialism* offered the majority of historians, opting for the theme, plus an anthropologist and a sociologist, a prime opportunity to test a model that has caused a considerable stir in anthropology and sociology and that has been considered fruitful for the historian as well. The 14 papers concerning this theme range from a theoretical overview of the theme in connection with the study of Indonesian history, via a broad panoramic study on segmentation and mediation in late-colonial Indonesia to a number of studies on groups of middlemen or situations of mediation in colonial society, such as the regents of 19th century Java, mestizos in 18th and 19th century Macassar, the Malays on Bima with the coming of Islam, and the officials of the Company in 17th century trade between Indonesia and Manila. Finally a number of writers has concerned themselves with specific case studies of particular middlemen, such as the *peranakan* Chinese officer's family of 19th century Semarang, the Resident of Saparua (1817-1823) Lambertus Smit de Haart, the Arab adventurer Said Abdullah bin Abdulkadir Jelani or late 19th century Lombok, the *Mardijker* Majoor Jantje in