



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Writing histories of contemporary Africa

Ellis, S.D.K.

### Citation

Ellis, S. D. K. (2002). Writing histories of contemporary Africa. *The Journal Of African History*, 43(1), 1-26. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/9513>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License:

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/9513>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Transition,

frican Rear	
RICHARD REID	158
m Around	
rogan	
BRETT SHADLE	160
ch-	
ch-	
RNEIT-SIEVERS	161
d War.	
Y H. PARSONS	163
y of Nontetha	
AH GAITSKELL	164
contents.	
ANN O'HEAR	166
uccessors.	
RTIN A. KLEIN	167
FOYIN FALOLA	168
Politics,	
ARD RATHBONE	170
istory of the	
AN PHIMISTER	172
1899–1940.	
SUSAN KENYON	173
ization and	
IAN SADOWSKY	174
Strategies in	
BERT L. TIGNOR	175
Letters from	
IVOR WILKS	177
nd Waluguru	
AVID MAXWELL	178
nging	
DRY H. MADDOX	180
INDA HEYWOOD	181
h and	
IPHER CLAPHAM	182
orthern Ghana	
MARK BREUSERS	183
ANDRA PANGETI	185
ociety and	
RISTOPHER FYFE	186
Volume I :	
HONY CLAYTON	187
ROB SKINNER	188
A. B. SIKHONDZE	189

## WRITING HISTORIES OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICA\*

BY STEPHEN ELLIS

*Afrika-Studiecentrum, Leiden*

**ABSTRACT:** This essay argues that historians need to engage with the history of contemporary Africa both as a way of throwing new light on Africa's more remote past and as a way of understanding the present. The paper discusses two types of problem involved in such an enterprise. The first is the identification of the most fruitful themes for investigation. The second is the sources that may be used.

**KEY WORDS:** Historiography, post-colonial, sources.

Forty years, or nearly two generations, have passed since the majority of African states became independent. This passage of time presses historians to consider how they might write histories of Africa since independence. Not least among those who might find such work useful are historians of earlier periods, if only for the functional reason that every piece of the past forms a context for other pieces of the past. Histories of colonial times, for example, are inevitably coloured by what we think we know about what happened next. Conversely, some keen observers of contemporary Africa, although not motivated by any professional commitment to historical inquiry, nevertheless feel impelled to investigate the recent past as a means of understanding phenomena that are apparent today, in an effort to produce a more convincing explanation than is currently available of how things came to be the way they are.<sup>1</sup> Analyses of this sort may be more relevant to the rest of the world than is generally realized.<sup>2</sup>

In short, both historians and specialists from other disciplines sometimes find unsatisfactory the models of historical explanation that are available to them when they are studying Africa's recent past and its present. This is unsurprising inasmuch as many of the contemporary histories written in the 1960s and 1970s reflected the political preoccupations considered most urgent at that time, using the intellectual models that seemed most convincing.<sup>3</sup> For all their achievement, such works by and large no longer speak to concerns that appear important today, as we shall see, and yet they have not been replaced by a new generation of contemporary histories rooted in

\* I am grateful for comments on a previous draft of this paper by David Killingray and by two anonymous referees.

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Florence Bernault, 'L'Afrique et la modernité des sciences sociales', *Vingtième siècle*, 70 (2001), 127–38.

<sup>3</sup> This includes much of the work of Basil Davidson, for example, probably the best-selling historian of contemporary Africa in English over a long period. On the key themes of the 1960s, Terence Ranger (ed.), *Emerging Themes in African History* (Nairobi, 1968).

more up-to-date themes.<sup>4</sup> If anything, the void has been filled by journalists' accounts, which can be excellent, but which are not quite contemporary history.<sup>5</sup>

This essay considers how a new generation of works on Africa's contemporary history might be written. Most of the examples chosen concern Africa south of the Sahara, but some of the remarks may also apply to north Africa. At times, the essay may seem to refer to contemporary history as though that were synonymous with the period since the golden age of independence, the late 1950s and 1960s. It is, however, an important part of the following argument that the writing of contemporary history sometimes requires going much further into the past than forty or fifty years ago. It is for this reason that some recent general histories of Africa, although necessarily treating the contemporary period as only a small part of a larger whole, are nonetheless rich in their implications for consideration of more recent times.<sup>6</sup> This is further evidence of the seamlessness of all history. Such matters are discussed in the first part of the paper, which briefly considers some of the techniques used in writing contemporary history before going on to discuss particular themes that could be addressed in regard to Africa. Any identification of those aspects of Africa's recent past that are thought to be sufficiently important, interesting or rewarding for historians to use as central themes has to be based on criteria of some sort. It is of crucial importance to consider what these criteria might be. It should not be assumed that the leading themes of Africa's recent history must always be the same as those which are seen as the most relevant by historians of other parts of the world. Africa, like every other place, has a distinctive character derived largely from its particular history, and yet it is also a part of a single world bound together by what people have experienced in common. Assessing the relationship of distinctiveness on the one hand to human commonality on the other is one of the most delicate and consequential of the historian's tasks.

The second half of the essay concerns the sources that historians of contemporary Africa have at their disposal. Here it is argued that, although sources are abundant, they are not always of a type that historians feel comfortable in using. This may have an effect on the way historians insert Africa in the time-scales generally used in world history, just as it is having an effect on the way in which Africans tend to think of themselves in relation to their own past.

#### PROBLEMS OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

Academic history-writing involves assembling masses of verifiable facts and arranging them in a series, generally a chronological one, or a set of such

<sup>4</sup> I have analyzed this in more detail with regard to one important subject of contemporary African history, namely liberation war: Stephen Ellis, 'Africa's wars of liberation: some historiographical reflections', in Piet Konings, Wim van Binsbergen and Gerdt Hesselink (eds.), *Trajectoires de libération en Afrique contemporaine* (Paris, 2000), 69–91.

<sup>5</sup> Among recent best-sellers in this genre are Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York, 1998); Bill Berkeley, *The Graves Are Not Yet Full: Race, Tribe and Power in the Heart of Africa* (New York, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> E.g. John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge, 1995).

series. Some historians may immediately recoil at this use of the word 'fact' to describe historical data. The word is used here to designate empirically verifiable events of the past, distinguishable from rumour, myth, memory and fiction (all of which may have a role to play in historical reconstructions, as we will see). The arrangement of such facts in a series is not the only activity undertaken by historians and perhaps not even the most distinctive aspect of their task. What is proper to the work of a historian as opposed to that of a natural scientist who is reconstructing, say, the stages of development of a species of dinosaur, is the effort to penetrate the thinking of those who were implicated in the events of the past.<sup>7</sup> Arranging the data in a sequence and attempting to re-think the thoughts of those involved create a narrative; even a historian who spurns story-telling still creates a narrative in some shape or form, implied by the type of facts selected and the sequence into which they are fitted.

It is in considering history-writing in these terms that it soon becomes apparent why some historians may be suspicious of any attempt to write the history of recent times, for such an enterprise is undertaken by inquirers who do not have a complete sequence of historical data and who are therefore obliged to make premature judgments as to the logic or the significance of the series they assemble. This begs the question of what is meant by a 'complete' sequence of historical data. Strictly speaking, no narrative based on a series of historical facts is ever complete, not only because further information could always be added to the sequence (for example, by finding relevant new data to insert), but also because telling or retelling a story itself adds a new element to the sequence. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the longer ago the period under discussion, the easier it is to discern a beginning and an end to a given sequence of events and to appreciate the pattern of the whole. In writing the history of the contemporary world, by contrast, the final phase is notably incomplete. No matter how well researched, such a work of history is fated to become obsolete as new events occur that tend to invalidate whatever combinations of facts appeared to have a sequential logic at the time of writing. This is true of all history-writing inasmuch as the historian is bound to see things from the standpoint of present time, but, views change with particular speed in regard to recent history.

Historical research, moreover, ideally consists of something more than sifting the records of the past in a single-minded search for data that have a direct bearing on current concerns. According to some accomplished practitioners, it is important to see the past not just as the embryo of the present, but also as a period in its own right, replete with unfulfilled ambitions and disappointed hopes, ideas that once seemed important but that did not actually result in outcomes that are still with us today. One historian of the European past reminds us that this is not just a story of 'inevitable victories and forward marches'.<sup>8</sup> The same could be said of Africa – or perhaps it would be more appropriate, in view of the streak of pessimism often apparent in writing about contemporary Africa, to turn the proposition upside down by saying that Africa's past is not only a story of tragic failures and retreats. Triumphalist and defeatist histories are

<sup>7</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946; edn. with introduction and editorial material by Jan van der Dussen, Oxford, 1993), 228.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London, 1999), xii.

merely two sides of the same, devalued coin. Of more worth is an appreciation that the present is 'just one possible outcome of our predecessors' struggles and uncertainties'.<sup>9</sup>

The examination of the past-in-the-present together with the turning-points at which history failed to turn<sup>10</sup> is an original contribution that contemporary history can bring to the literature concerning our world today.<sup>11</sup> It may even be quite urgent for such an approach lest Africa be seen, by the general public and even by professional historians, in Europe and North America especially, as existing in a timeless zone where events are no more than what one British historian notoriously called 'unrewarding gyrations'.<sup>12</sup> There are many accounts of the recent African past produced by politicians, journalists, essayists, biographers and other writers of various sorts that, being ordered chronologically, could be considered histories. In addition, historical material is assembled by specialists in academic disciplines such as political science and anthropology. Historians bring to the same or similar data a particular approach. Their special expertise consists in the techniques they use to recover the record of the past and the precise manner in which they arrange their data in sequences.

Thus contemporary histories may bring a new perspective to Africa's present by viewing it through the prism of its past. They have the potential to change the way that people think about Africa by picking out strands from its past that are sometimes unnoticed, or by combining these threads in new ways. In order best to do this, however, it seems necessary to identify, at least tentatively, the themes that most deserve to be studied.

#### HISTORICAL THEMES

The golden age of Africa's independence<sup>13</sup> occurred at a time when intellectuals and politicians in both the first and second worlds, as they were then called, were generally convinced that social science had the power not only to provide accurate explanations of political and social phenomena but also to serve as a guide to action. Their colleagues in the third world had every incentive to share their view that societies could be governed, politics regulated and economies stimulated, by a range of techniques that could be identified and implemented by the established methods collectively described as 'modernization'. This was perhaps the key concept of the ideologies of

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>10</sup> A phrase borrowed from A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History* (London, 1945), 68.  
<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of method, see Geoffrey Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History* (New York, 1964), especially ch. 1.  
<sup>12</sup> This phrase was originally used by Hugh Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford, in 1963 during a series of lectures at Sussex University which was also broadcast by BBC Television. It later appeared in a book, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (London, 1965), 9-11. For a full exegesis, see Finn Rugestad, 'The Trevor-Roper trap, or the imperialism of history. An essay', *History in Africa*, 19 (1992), 309-26.

<sup>13</sup> The period from the mid-1950s until the independence of the former Portuguese colonies in 1975. Only Seychelles, Zimbabwe and Namibia gained independence (and Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia) later than this.

both left and right extant at the time of Africa's independence.<sup>14</sup> Influential political scientists saw Africa as the site of nation-building and party formation.<sup>15</sup> Economists and sociologists considered it ripe for development.<sup>16</sup> The historians who were writing in the first years of Africa's independence, like all historians, swam in the currents of their time, and this was reflected in the attention they devoted to the historical antecedents of what various academic colleagues and political actors and opinion-formers were identifying as the burning issues of contemporary Africa. One experienced African historian has recently noted that members of the profession in the first years of independence tended towards a misguided search for uniformity, intent on mapping a history for each newly-emerged state when they might have been better advised to think in terms of multiple histories.<sup>17</sup> New states required new historical charters.

Independence in most African countries occurred at the mid-point of the period between 1945 and the mid-1970s that witnessed a worldwide economic boom of unprecedented size and scope. It was accompanied by profound changes in the way people lived. This was also the period that saw the birth of African history as an academic discipline. To be sure, people have been writing texts recognizable as histories of Africa since the seventeenth century at least,<sup>18</sup> but it remains useful to distinguish this earlier work from the modern type of history-writing that is dominated by professional academics making systematic use of archives, a technique applied to the history of Africa only since the mid-twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> The first generation of professional Africanist historians created a basic chronological division of Africa's past into pre-colonial, colonial and independent periods, a trinity recalling the conventional European concept of ancient, medieval and modern history. At bottom, the division of African history into these periods was an assertion that the establishment of colonial rule marked a feature in African history so basic that it could be considered a change of era,<sup>20</sup> with the implication that, as Basil Davidson put it in 1959, Africa's history was beginning anew with the proclamations of independence.<sup>21</sup> The rather brief colonial period became the fulcrum around which African

<sup>14</sup> Naomi Chazan, Robert Mortimer, John Ravenhill and Donald Rothchild, *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa* (2nd edn, Boulder, 1992), 15-17.  
<sup>15</sup> Classic studies of the period include e.g. James S. Coleman, James S. Coleman and David Apter, *The Gold Coast in Transition* (Princeton, 1955), a subsequent edition of which was retitled *Ghana in Transition*; James S. Coleman and Carl Rosberg (eds.), *Political Parties and National Integration in Tropical Africa* (Berkeley, 1964). During the early 1980s the *African Studies Review* published a series of excellent guides to the literature by discipline, which provides useful summaries of the works that had been most influential in the preceding decades.

<sup>16</sup> A good summary, from a Marxist perspective, is Colin Leys, *The Rise and Fall of Development Theory* (London, 1996), 3-44.  
<sup>17</sup> Arnold Tenu, 'Not telling: African history at the end of the millennium', *South African Historical Journal*, 42 (2000), 2-10. A similar point is made by Frederick Cooper, 'Africa's pasts and Africa's historians', *African Sociological Review*, 3 (1999), 1-29.  
<sup>18</sup> Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison, 1994), 40-59.  
<sup>19</sup> For an overview of the development of Africanist history-writing, Joseph C. Miller, 'History and Africa/Africa and history', *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), 1-32.  
<sup>20</sup> For a more extended discussion, see Ellis, 'Africa's wars of liberation', esp. 68-78.  
<sup>21</sup> Basil Davidson, *Old Africa Rediscovered* (London, 1970; first edn, 1959), 266-8.

history turned, with time stretching backwards and forwards from that point into the infinite 'pre' and 'post' ages, both defined by reference to colonialism.<sup>22</sup>

No one deserves to be castigating for failing to predict the future, but it is legitimate to point out the extent to which social scientists writing thirty or forty years ago may now be seen to have identified the key aspects of the present, as it then was, in features which turn out to have been less durable than anticipated. Political independence has turned out not to have had such a straightforward connection with development as many commentators and analysts once assumed. It seems that it was the belief in a more or less clearly signposted road to modernization or development, so widely held by intellectuals in the west, the socialist bloc and Africa around the time of Africa's independence, that caused many of even the most penetrating analysts of that time to suppose that the features of African life that they identified as being the most dynamic in the 1960s and 1970s were permanent fixtures. Among these was an assumption that African political life was henceforth likely to revolve around the state and other formal institutions in much the same way as it had come to do since the seventeenth century in Europe, so many of whose political institutions had been exported to Africa. Nowadays, forty years later, it is more convincing to argue that sovereign independence, desirable though it was on a variety of grounds, and politically unstoppable, was not a universal milestone, but is in reality a concept largely derived from studies of Europe and North America.<sup>23</sup>

If one seeks to identify points of discontinuity in Africa's history since independence or, to be more precise, in the history of Africa's insertion in the world, it becomes apparent that many ruptures first became visible in the 1970s, when oil crises, currency instability and a series of related events and trends combined to create a comprehensive change in the prospects for African states and societies, and in the forms of their political life. One leading observer of the history of the world in the twentieth century is surely correct in seeing that decade as a time of change more crucial than 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin wall.<sup>24</sup> One effect of the crises of the 1970s was to render obsolete many of the assumptions that had been unchallengeable only a few years earlier.

Some of the ambitions, fears and aspirations of the 1960s, although still within living memory, now seem so distant as to be barely comprehensible. They have become history. Some opinion-formers and political actors, however, including many African leaders themselves, continue to make rhetorical allusions to the great themes of the independence generation: nation-building, liberation, economic development, pan-Africanism, the struggle against dependence. These ideals are not ignoble. The problem, rather, in intellectual terms is that they have turned out to be less fully understood by social science than was thought to be the case some decades ago, while in political terms they have proved less easily attainable than was

<sup>22</sup> Cf. the remarks in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (1961; Penguin edn., London, 1993), 67.  
<sup>23</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2001), 9–11.  
<sup>24</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London, 1994), 6.

once thought likely. One of the sharpest African political commentators noted that a rhetorical insistence by political leaders on the ideals of the past is a way of avoiding the real political debates of the present.<sup>25</sup> Persistent reference to outdated ideals may also be considered as a spurious attempt to acquire legitimacy by speaking the language of revered ancestors.

This rhetorical poverty should not be blamed on politicians alone. Intellectuals too have done little to renew the vocabularies that are at the disposal of politicians both inside and outside Africa. The historian Achille Mbembe is most severe on this point. Regarding the literature of political science and development economics, he writes,<sup>26</sup>

these disciplines have undermined the very possibility of understanding African economic and political facts. In spite of the countless critiques made of theories of social evolutionism and ideologies of development and modernization, the academic output in these disciplines continues, almost entirely, in total thrall to these two teleologies.

Historians have made their own modest contribution to this unsatisfactory state of affairs by their reluctance to reconsider Africa's contemporary history in terms appropriate to the present state of affairs. To create or repeat a narrative of contemporary history that coheres around the notions of political and economic development in vogue at the time of independence is to continue working in the shadow of the great ideals of forty years ago. Such a narrative risks excluding some key events from the sequences of data it assembles. It is also relevant to note that it is almost certain to produce a story of failure, since what is happening in Africa today is being examined at least implicitly in terms of ideals that are not of this age and whose grounding in African societies is itself in need of greater study. This was observed already in 1987 by a historian who asked, in regard to the previous twenty-five years, 'whose dream was it anyway?'<sup>27</sup>

To be sure, it is legitimate – necessary, even – for historians to reconsider lost ideals and to wonder why things went wrong or whose fault it was. But if this becomes the dominant theme of their writing, then it should be no surprise if their essays are read as expressions of nostalgia or tragedy. It makes all the difference if such an inquiry into the contemporary period is conducted in the consciousness of ideas that are alive in society today in the sense of motivating actual behaviour. This may not result in reading that is edifying, but it will always be relevant. There is, for example, now a substantial literature on the 1994 genocide in Rwanda that, quite properly, examines how such a thing could happen and who was responsible.<sup>28</sup> It is outdated ideals that they risk becoming sterile. They risk misidentifying some features of the more recent landscape by viewing them through an old lens. This has, for example, been a feature of the historiography of African liberation movements, too often seen as harking back to a perceived golden

<sup>25</sup> E.g. Claude Ake, *Democracy and Development in Africa* (Washington DC, 1996), 1–17.  
<sup>26</sup> Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 7.  
<sup>27</sup> Michael Crowder, 'Whose dream was it anyway? Twenty-five years of African independence', *African Affairs*, 86 (1987), 7–24.  
<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the most thorough of which is Human Rights Watch (written by Alison Des Forges), 'Leave No One to Tell the Story': *Genocide in Rwanda* (New York, 1999).

age of revolution and liberation rather than being situated in their own time.<sup>29</sup> It leads to the position where writers on Africa's contemporary history who take as their starting-points the features of Africa that are visible today risk appearing as pessimists because their stories form a narrative of failure to achieve high ideals, whereas those whose narratives continue to privilege the ideals of a bygone age are liable to be seen as optimists, but romantic and out of touch ones. The ensuing Afro-optimist versus Afro-pessimist stand-off is reinforced by journalists in search of pathos and humanitarians in need of funds.

This surely is an intellectual cul-de-sac. It is perhaps because the prospect of writing Africa's contemporary history in such terms has become so unattractive that there has been a noticeable decline in publication within this sub-discipline since the 1970s. My own count of the articles published in the *Journal of African History* from 1990–1999 and listed in the cumulative index suggests that 65 articles were published on the pre-colonial history of Africa in that period, 118 on colonial history and 18 on general subjects. Only one article unambiguously concerned contemporary history, and that was a historiographical survey rather than a presentation of original research.<sup>30</sup> A rapid search of other leading journals of African history for the same decade suggests some three articles fairly unambiguously addressing contemporary history in the *International Journal of African Historical Studies*. History in Africa, being a journal of method, is more difficult to classify by period. This is a straw poll only, since studies of Africa's contemporary history are also to be found in current affairs journals such as the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, *African Affairs*, *Cahiers d'études africaines*, *Politique africaine*, the *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* and others. It does, though, underline the point that the main journals of African history appear to have developed a certain reticence in regard to contemporary history, perhaps for some of the reasons suggested here, leading writers in this mode to place their work elsewhere. The lack of much in the way of an authentic historical approach to Africa's contemporary period impoverishes the work of other disciplines too, including political science, which remains driven more often by contemporary theoretical questions than by preoccupations rooted in the historicity of Africa or of its insertion into the world.<sup>31</sup>

The above remarks, amounting to no more than a sketch, do scant justice to the many works that have suggested new fields of contemporary history-writing. These have been particularly innovative in regard to personal relations and the lives of small communities. We may cite some examples. Given the enormous changes that have taken place in family life over the last couple of generations – not just in Africa but in many other parts of the world as well – a new interest in histories of gender and family is entirely

<sup>29</sup> Key exponents of a more realistic view are Norma Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War: Peasant Voices* (Cambridge, 1992); Colin Leys and John Saul, *Namibia's Liberation Struggle: The Two-Edged Sword* (London, 1995); Ineke van Kessel, 'Beyond Our Wildest Dreams': *The United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa* (Charlottesville, 2000).  
<sup>30</sup> Donald Crummey, 'Society, state and nationality in the recent historiography of Ethiopia', *Journal of African History*, 31 (1990), 103–19.  
<sup>31</sup> Cf. the attempt at renewal by Jean-François Bayart, 'Africa in the world: a history of extraversion', *African Affairs*, 99 (2000), 217–67.

welcome.<sup>32</sup> The history of locality, although it has never been absent from the historiography of Africa, has also received a flip from the anthropological concern with the relation of locality to identity.<sup>33</sup> These and others are worthy additions to the historical literature on fairly recent times but it is evident that few of these notable contributions, opening inroads into contemporary themes as they do, engage with what arguably remains the overwhelming problem of Africa today, and the one most in need of rethinking: how to secure an equitable public order. It is also notable how few of these works have been produced by African writers living in Africa, who surely apprehend the conditions of their continent most directly. The reasons for the latter are connected to the poor condition of many African universities as a result of financial difficulties and the growing dominance of international journals by non-African scholars or by Africans who, based in north America and Europe especially, may become engaged in Euro-American debates, particularly on a range of theoretical issues that do not arise directly out of Africa's experience. In some countries, of which South Africa is the most striking example, young intellectuals and professionals seem uninterested in history to judge from the lack of student enrolment in history degree courses, perhaps regarding it as a dead weight on the present that is best discarded. In these circumstances, one of the most useful signs of what the African condition is, or is perceived to be by those people living in the continent who are best able to make their opinions known, is the flourishing but largely ignored African pamphlet and media literature that will be briefly described in the second half of the present essay.

It seems, then, that the vogue for applying to the history of Africa postmodern theories drawn from philosophy and cultural and literary studies, while it has resulted in many notable achievements, has not always helped in the identification of themes of Africa's contemporary history that are rooted in some of the key preoccupations of Africans today. It is tempting to conclude that, while the idea that Africa is making progress according to the tenets of mid-twentieth century modernization theory has become more or less formally extinct in academic circles, the implication remains that it *should* be modernizing, by reference to many of the same criteria as were current forty years ago. In the last resort, few academic writers are able to escape the supposition that a stable, prosperous and non-violent existence is the aim of all right-thinking people and that this is best ensured by public policy in a well-ordered state, one organised according to the western models that have become just about universally accepted, at least in theory. If this is indeed so, it is a reflection of a belief that goes much deeper than current academic fashion. Europeans and North Americans for the last two centuries or so have generally held that all the world's societies, including those of Africa, ought to be heading in a roughly similar direction and that the most

<sup>32</sup> E.g. Louise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Natal* (Chicago, 1990).  
<sup>33</sup> E.g. Jocelyn Alexander, John McCreger and Terence Ranger, *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the 'Dark Forests' of Matabeleland* (Oxford, 2000).  
<sup>34</sup> Megan Vaughan, *Turning Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Cambridge, 1991); Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon: Of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham, 1999).

A wide variety of opinions is possible about which problems are actual in Africa today. In regard to politics at least, many observers would no doubt agree on such matters as the high number of states unable to fulfil basic functions of security or welfare provision; the high level of international public debt; the number of wars; the extent of ethnic mobilization; the consequences of weak economic performance; the resilience and even revivals of religion in public space; and the manner of Africa's insertion in international relations. A historian interested in social matters might identify as important or striking features of Africa today: family and gender demography; the rise of AIDS and the re-emergence of other diseases; the workings of the informal economy; the growth of cities; patterns of migration. Other subjects could also be listed. It is interesting to note that many of these themes have important antecedents in colonial times or earlier,<sup>35</sup> for it is becoming increasingly apparent that the travails of African states are closely related to the fact that the modern state-system was introduced into most parts of Africa only rather recently and that some significant vestiges of precolonial political organization may still be detected in the continent today. This suggests a need for historians of contemporary Africa to devote particular attention to the structures of political and social organization and power relationships as they appear today and to extend the starting-point of their data sequences back into pre-colonial times if necessary, without paying undue heed to the proclamations of formal independence that, while significant, did not always mark the radical break with the past that many observers once took for granted.

The list of research topics in the previous paragraph is no more than a few examples. It may strike some readers as containing a discouraging number of themes that risk representing Africa in an unfavourable light. Why not focus instead on the re-emergence of parliamentary democracy? The flowering of the free press? The changing condition of women? These are, of course, all possible subjects for research. But the point is less to compile a list of interesting research topics than to make the point that almost any given sequence of data can be arranged in a set that suggests degrees of either progress or regression and optimism or pessimism. It is largely a question of where the data start and the patterns into which they are arranged. It is precisely because of the dominance of historical models of state-building and economic and social development influenced by the social science theories of dominant in the mid-twentieth century that contemporary histories of Africa, or parts of it, run such a risk of appearing as stories of failure and decay. Other ways of ordering and interpreting data, extending the data-set in some circumstances back to pre-colonial times, could represent Africa as emerging gradually from attempts to oblige populations to submit to structures of domination that were originally imported from Europe, thus portraying a post-colonial Africa groping to reconnect with deeper currents of its own history in which power is organized other than through bureaucratic corporations disposing of a monopoly of legitimate violence.<sup>40</sup> It

<sup>35</sup> Cf. David Anderson and Richard Rathbone (eds.), *Africa's Urban Past* (Oxford, 2000); there are also many rich suggestions in Iliffe, *Africans*.  
<sup>40</sup> This is not dissimilar to a suggestion made by Ali Mazrui, 'Identity politics and the nation-state under siege: towards a theory of reverse evolution', *Social Dynamics*, 25 (1999), 5–25.

thoughtful and most powerful westerners know what this direction is. Over time, others of the world's elites have come to share this view. This direction for all humanity was known to the nineteenth-century colonizers of Africa as 'civilization', and its ideal descendant today is called 'globalization'. Whatever the name, it is taken to be a progressive movement along a more-or-less identifiable path.<sup>35</sup> Any human society that fails to follow this route, in the view of many leading thinkers and technocrats in the west and elsewhere, is considered to have deviated from the one and only road leading towards human improvement. (The preceding sentence, I would emphasize, is not my own view but my attempt to summarize a common assumption.) The economist Deepak Lal has written that this and many 'so-called universal values' associated with it are 'actually part of a culture-specific, proselytizing ethic of what remains at heart western Christendom', with a pedigree centuries long.<sup>36</sup> This is a point of view in urgent need of further investigation.

For all the radical pretensions of the postmodern movement in the humanities and the social sciences, many of the studies influenced by postmodernism have not been 'post' enough in the sense that they have not engaged in a sufficiently pointed critique of a range of fundamental assumptions made by earlier social scientists about how human societies are ordered. Postmodern thinkers have tended to concentrate on the important fields of discourse and representation, but have devoted far less attention to the crucial and eminently material matters of exchange and coercion in the relations between dominators and dominated. As two critics have written of works of 'post-foundational' historiography with particular regard to India, 'they have as much to do with arguments about the politics of representation in Western intellectual and academic circles, as they do with imposing that manner of representation on the third world's history'.<sup>37</sup>

#### EMERGING THEMES

According to Geoffrey Barraclough, 'contemporary history begins when the problems which are actual in the world today first take visible shape'.<sup>38</sup> This definition suggests that the first task of a historian of the contemporary world is to consider which aspects of the present are of prime importance and, most especially, which features distinguish the current period of time from previous ages. Determining what these distinguishing features are is a crucial task since the resulting identification will have a bearing on the choice of historical material to be gathered into sequential order.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Frederick Cooper, 'What is the concept of globalization good for? An African historian's perspective', *African Affairs*, 100 (2001), 189–214.  
<sup>36</sup> Deepak Lal, 'Asia and Western dominance: retrospect and prospect', *International Institute of Asian Studies Annual Lecture*, Leiden, 27 Oct. 2000, summarized in *IIAS Newsletter* 24 (Feb. 2001), 3. This is explored at full length in D. Lal, *Unintended Consequences: The Impact of Factor Endowments, Culture and Politics on Long-Run Economic Performance* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).  
<sup>37</sup> Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, 'After Orientalism: culture, criticism and politics in the third world', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 34 (1992), 142.  
<sup>38</sup> Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History*, 12. Italics in the original.



is precisely the element of chronological depth, in support of an analysis of the origins and antecedents of the world today, which distinguishes the writing of contemporary history from the study of current affairs or from media punditry.<sup>41</sup>

## SOURCES

The ambition of the pioneering generation of academic historians of Africa was to reconstruct Africa's past in chronological sequence primarily (but not only) by locating archives from which verifiable and datable facts could be drawn. This would enable Africa's history to be described in the same way as has been done for the industrialized world since the nineteenth century. One French historian noted in 1962 that if African historians were creating for themselves a history in the conventional north Atlantic mode, by attempting to situate even Africa's most distant past in the chronological patterns held to govern the history of the world, then it was 'a sign that they aspire to play by the rules of the world, which were to a large extent written in the West'.<sup>42</sup> The compilation of a version of the past that will qualify as academic history is dependent on chronology, which in turn depends on the availability of precisely datable sources of the type that bureaucracies produce as a matter of course. This poses an immediate question with regard to contemporary history, for many official archives and private papers do not become available for twenty-five years or more after their redaction, and even then it may take more years before some sort of consensus emerges as to the value of particular archives.

But it is increasingly clear that it is not just a matter of time before Africa's contemporary history is revealed as archives become accessible to scholars. Bluntly stated, it is unlikely that historians seeking to write the history of Africa since independence will enjoy the same quality of documents as their colleagues studying the colonial period. This, it should be said at once, is an unsentimental judgement, for there does not appear to have been any general survey carried out on the location or condition of African official archives compiled since the 1960s, the decade of independence.<sup>43</sup> There is certainly a distressing number of archives in the continent that have suffered massively from war damage – the state archives of Liberia for example<sup>44</sup> – or from environmental hazards such as rain, fungus and termites. The comprehensive

<sup>41</sup> Barracough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History*, 8.  
<sup>42</sup> Henri Brunschwig, 'Histoire, passé et frustration en Afrique noire', *Annales*, 17 (1962), 875.  
<sup>43</sup> The main source on Africanist archives is the International Council on Archives, *Guide des sources de l'Afrique* (9 vols., Zug, 1970–83), the result of a UNESCO-sponsored project that concerns almost entirely archives from pre-independence periods. There are regular descriptions of archives to be found in the journal *History in Africa*. E.g. 27 (2000) has articles on Ghanaian, Ugandan and Mozambican archives, on the documentary collection at South Africa's Fort Hare University.  
<sup>44</sup> Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War* (London, 1999), 322, based on information given to the author by the director-general of the National Documentation Center in Liberia.

looting of capital cities including Freetown, Monrovia, Mogadishu, Kinshasa and Brazzaville in recent years bodes ill for the survival of major archives. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in some places government documents generated since the 1960s have not been placed in official archives at all. On the positive side, there are also state archives in Africa that contain abundant material and were reasonably well-organised and well-maintained up to the 1990s at least. Sometimes even local archives contain recoverable material.<sup>45</sup> A useful archive does not just contain large numbers of interesting documents but is also classified, catalogued and generally maintained, all of which requires money that, for many types of state activity, has been in short supply since the onset of a financial crisis in so many African countries, sometimes twenty or more years ago.

In the absence of a systematic survey of African state archives, a tentative impression based on largely anecdotal evidence is that in many African countries official archives for the post-1970 period especially are likely to be financially poorly maintained and difficult to use, and even when they have not been deliberately vandalized. This is also likely to be generally true for non-state archives. The production of archives by any corporation requires a style of management that places a high value on the maintenance of an institutional memory in documentary form, which may not always be the case in businesses or other institutions in Africa, including many churches, for example. Even some heads of state in Africa operate largely on a basis of orality, preferring spoken rather than written briefings from their aides. Without doubt there are private archives waiting to be identified and used by historians. Individuals can be persuaded to write down their own knowledge.<sup>46</sup> Fascinating material is likely to emanate from collections compiled by churches, international organizations and businesses, or simply from private or family papers, which will throw light on Africa in the 1980s or 1990s. The history of medieval and early modern Europe shows the use that can be made of such sources, the material for brilliant micro-studies of small communities or even of individuals.<sup>47</sup> A comparable African micro-history is that of the South African sharecropper Kasi Mainie, although this, unlike the European studies cited, was compiled largely through oral rather than documentary sources.<sup>48</sup> Brilliant studies of individual locations or of small groups of people in colonial times have been produced partly on the basis of oral research.<sup>49</sup> But the value of studies such as these is often proportionate to the research that

<sup>45</sup> Gregory Mann, 'Dust to dust: a user's guide to local archives in Mali', *History in Africa*, 26 (1999), 453–6.  
<sup>46</sup> Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirits: War in Northern Uganda* (Oxford, 1999), 10–11.  
<sup>47</sup> E.g. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaliou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294–1324* (trans. Barbara Bray, London, 1978; first French edn, 1975); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (trans. John and Anne Tedeschi, London, 1980; first Italian edn, 1976).  
<sup>48</sup> Charles van Onselen, *The Seed is Mine: The Life of Kas Mainie, a South African Sharecropper, 1894–1985* (Oxford, 1996).  
<sup>49</sup> E.g. Kristin Mann, *Marrying Well: Marriage, Status and Social Change among the Educated Elite in Colonial Lagos* (Cambridge, 1985); Landeg White, *Magomero: Portraiture of an African Village* (Cambridge, 1987).



has already been done on matters of wider reach, especially on government and on state politics, so that the biography of a Samkange family<sup>50</sup> or of a Kas Maine illuminates a wider society because quite a lot is already known about the general history of southern Africa in the twentieth century. One implication is that historians interested in mentalities, culture or sensibility in contemporary Africa, even if they are able to locate rich private archives, are likely to find that the value of these holdings is limited in the absence of material about the wider society.

There are many other collections of documents concerning contemporary

Africa. There are for example archives produced by foreign organizations, such as diplomatic missions in Africa, the World Bank, humanitarian organizations and so on. Some of these may already be accessed, at least partially or occasionally, especially through the Internet, and in time they may be expected to open their archives more fully. Many collections of papers on development projects are not formally published but exist only in photocopies or as 'grey literature', almost impossible to locate systematically. International legal records can also be a useful source but are similarly difficult to locate. But if an Africanist historian depends heavily on an archive produced by foreigners, who sometimes frankly misunderstand and always give a particular interpretation to what they observe, and who generally have a professional interest in recording certain types of information only, how is one to avoid reflecting the resultant bias in a historical work? Historians of pre-colonial Africa face exactly this problem and have nevertheless produced many excellent works in which archives produced by European traders, missionaries and diplomats have been used to reconstruct events in African societies that produced few written records themselves.<sup>51</sup> Their work surely serves as a model for the historian of contemporary Africa, who, especially where good state archives are unavailable and foreign records therefore take on a larger importance, needs to pay more than usual attention to the cardinal rules of gathering historical evidence, considering who has produced a particular item of information, in what context and for what purpose.

There is, though, at least one major source of African-generated documentation that is available to historians of recent decades in Africa, providing rarely for those researching the distant African past. This consists of accounts of events authored contemporaneously or near-contemporaneously by Africans. This category includes eye-witness accounts by journalists and others in book form, in newspapers and periodicals or on the internet, memoirs and autobiographies, as well as information broadcast via radio, film or video. In some parts of Africa – a continent generally considered a graveyard for academic publishing – there is clearly a market for short books falling within this category, produced by local publishers. To take only one

<sup>50</sup> The private papers of the Samkange family are described by Terence Ranger, *We Nor Also Men? The Samkange Family and African Politics in Zimbabwe, 1920–64* (London, 1995), vii–x.  
<sup>51</sup> Among many publications of high quality, recent examples include John Thornton, *The Kongolese Saint Anthony: Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita and the Antonian Movement, 1684–1706* (Cambridge, 1998); and Pier M. Larson, *History and Memory in the Age of Enslavement: Becoming Merina in Highland Madagascar, 1770–1822* (Oxford, 2000).

example, West African interest in the 1990s war in Liberia in which regional peacekeeping forces were deployed has resulted in a whole series of first-hand accounts published in the sub-region and clearly intended for a general public – and they are continuing to appear.<sup>52</sup> Similar accounts have been published in the USA especially, where there is a large Liberian diaspora, apparently aimed at a West African public in the first instance. Such first-hand accounts, being published in world languages in both form, represent a type of source that many historians will find reassuringly familiar. Other forms of information currently being produced may be more difficult to use. In some parts of Africa, such as northern Nigeria and Madagascar, there is a thriving local market in pamphlets written in vernacular languages, often almost unobtainable outside the country of origin. Above all, there are African mass media. It is generally accepted that the most important medium of mass communication in Africa is the radio, which, these days, is transmitted by a wide range of broadcasters, both official and otherwise, and reaches more Africans than do printed media or television or the internet.<sup>53</sup> The most obvious problem for anyone seeking to use radio as a historical source is the transience of the broadcast word, but this can be rectified in part by the use of the printed summaries published by the BBC in Britain (the *Summary of World Broadcasts*) and in the USA by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, a division of the Department of Commerce. These are important, and much under-used, sources for African history. The internet has a great number of sites where information on current events can be gleaned, although many of the discussion-sites especially are of extremely uneven quality and are dominated by contributions from people living outside Africa. More reliable are official websites for governments and organizations that, although often bland, have the advantage of being authoritative. A major obstacle for the scholar is the impermanence of many websites, suggesting that references that are gently noted may nevertheless have disappeared by the time a learned book or article is printed.<sup>54</sup> Film and video are somewhat less evanescent than the internet, since there are libraries that hold collections of material useful

historical research.<sup>55</sup> If permanence makes for viable sources, then it is the printed media magazines and newspapers that provide a more accessible and more comprehensive documentary record for historians. A practical problem consists in locating substantial collections of the massive range of African magazines. E.g. Leonard Breun, *Liberia: The War of Horror* (Accra, 1991); Nkhem Agel *Operation Liberty: The Story of Major General Joshua Ninyel Dogonyaro* (Lagos, 1995); Bayo Ogunleye, *Behind Rebel Line: Anatomy of Charles Taylor's Hostage Camps* (Enu 1995).  
<sup>52</sup> E.g. James Youberty, *Liberian Civil War: A Graphic Account* (Philadelphia, 1995).  
<sup>53</sup> André-Jean Tudesq, *Enlèvement de l'Afrique subsaharienne* (Tallence, France, 1995), 327–30. The same author has written a series of books on various aspects of African mass media, including television.  
<sup>54</sup> A point noted by Clifford Geertz, who refers to on-line quotations 'disappearing' electronic wreaths when you look back for them', 'Life Among the Antheos', *New York Review of Books*, 48 (8 Feb. 2001), 18, n. 5.  
<sup>55</sup> Robert Launay, 'Spirit media: the electronic media and Islam among the Dyula north Côte d'Ivoire', *Africa*, 67 (1997), 441–53, is a study of the effects of video rather than a historical study using video as a primary source.

and newspapers that now exists.<sup>57</sup> But this major source poses problems of interpretation that, in practice, are likely to be among the main challenges facing the historian. It is arguable that historians in general have shown themselves to be rather unskillful in their handling of the press as a source of regard newspapers and magazines as reliable records and often therefore considering them largely as supplements to a staple diet of official archives. It is the case that even a prestigious newspaper highly conscious of its own reputation and obsessive in its attention to detail – the *New York Times*, say – is produced at great speed, which is never conducive to accuracy. If only for this reason, even a so-called 'journal of record', which aspires to produce an accurate periodical account of what has happened and that is of concern to its readers, is liable to make factual mistakes. Perhaps more important still, it is useful to reflect that newspapers and magazines are genres that have their own rules, both written and unwritten.<sup>58</sup> Not all newspapers aim to be journals of record, and even when they do, their styles and traditions vary from country to country. Once again, historians are well advised to follow their basic precepts concerning evidence, asking themselves who has produced a particular document and why. It is particularly useful to bear in mind the often very parochial way in which newspapers and magazines are produced, with small numbers of journalists, editors and politicians writing to a considerable extent for each other, even when their publications have a wide circulation.<sup>59</sup>

In general, few African newspapers can be regarded as 'journals of record'. In the early years of independence, many African states had only one main newspaper, owned by the government or ruling party and committed to development or nation-building, the great mobilizing slogans of the day.<sup>60</sup> At worst, such papers were tawdry propaganda sheets, which does not mean that information cannot be gleaned from them but only that they cannot be regarded as attempting to give a full and disinterested account of significant events concerning a society. Even at best, official newspapers of this type must be regarded as highly partial sources. They are nevertheless invaluable historical sources, since even such things as photographs and advertisements may convey an enormous amount of information of use to historians.<sup>61</sup> Between the early 1960s and the late 1970s, the number of daily papers published in Africa actually fell as the many one-party states strove to

<sup>57</sup> Northwestern University and the Library of Congress both have exceptional collections.

<sup>58</sup> A historian who has written some well-known studies of the press in eighteenth-century France, Robert Darnton, is also a former journalist and has written penetratingly about modern American newspapers: *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York, 1990), 60–93.

<sup>59</sup> James Sanders, *South Africa and the International Media, 1972–1979: A Struggle for Representation* (London, 2000), esp. ch. 1.

<sup>60</sup> Rosalynde Amslie, *The Press in Africa: Communications Past and Present* (London, 1966), 9–20.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Schatzberg, for example, in a work in course of publication by Indiana University Press, has used newspapers from a range of African countries as sources for the analysis of prevailing ideas about political authority in what he calls 'middle Africa'. His published thoughts on the matter to date are in Michael Schatzberg, 'The household as model for legitimacy', *Africa*, 63 (1993), 445–61.

establish a monopoly of public information and as commercial operators were driven out by financial problems.<sup>62</sup> Even now, few Africans read newspapers at all: in 1998, only 11 newspapers were produced for every thousand people living in Africa, compared with 96 per thousand for the world as a whole.<sup>63</sup> By comparison, over the period 1994–7, on average 17 per thousand people in sub-Saharan Africa had a radio, and 44 per thousand had a television.<sup>64</sup> This says something about the place of the press in society and therefore about its value as a source. To a certain extent, though, the influence of a newspaper in the society where it is produced is not the key point. It is rather the relative durability of newspapers and magazines that gives them particular value as a source.

It is important for a historian who is contemplating using African newspapers as documents of record to consider the changing orientation of the press. (For that matter, the same consideration applies to non-African newspapers too, according to the principle that all historical sources need to be placed in the context of the time, place and circumstances of their production.) The African press has enormous variety. By and large, African newspapers throughout the 1960s and 1970s, including even the few that were independently owned, had to be mindful of the formidable monopolies of power that many ruling parties had acquired, and therefore to avoid stories or subjects that could be considered hostile to the national government. Important events could go completely unreported. Hence, from a historian's point of view, the press produced under single-party governments cannot be considered an accurate reflection of the political landscape of an African country, but only as a partial record of official thinking, or perhaps that of faction or tendency within a government. This is valuable enough. It does however, mean that for a history of unofficial thinking or of events not officially recognized, one needs to look elsewhere. For decades, there have been newspapers and magazines published by Africans or for African readers abroad, such as *Jeune Afrique* in Paris or *West Africa* in London. These to have their particular points of view, often reflecting opinions among the diaspora rather than among people living in Africa. The situation in most African countries changed rather quickly from the late 1980s with the demise of one-party states and a new freedom of expression that witnessed a massive increase in the number of newspapers and magazines.<sup>65</sup>

It has become apparent since the move away from one-party states in the early 1990s that the new, freer, African media do not generally reflect the classic values of the liberal press as these are often considered in the west. But then, even in the west the view of the press as watchdog or teller-of-truth to-power is based on a highly idealised view of its real nature. In many African countries various forms of government censorship remain, some times in the form of press laws or requirements for official registration, but

<sup>62</sup> International Press Institute, *A Rural Press for Africa* (London, 1979), 4.

<sup>63</sup> UNESCO, *Rapport mondial sur la culture, 2000* (Paris, 2000), 311. The same source has information on the availability of books, libraries, etc.

<sup>64</sup> World Bank, *African Development Indicators 2000* (Washington, 2000), 254.

<sup>65</sup> A case-study is W. Joseph Campbell, *The Emergent Press in Benin and Côte d'Ivoire From the Voice of the State to Advocate of Democracy* (Westport, 1998). The London based organisation Article 19 has also published a series of good studies, as have African based groups such as the Media Institute of Southern Africa.

also through the use of libel or similar laws to restrain journalists or simply by way of unofficial intimidation, bribery and manipulation. In the new, fragmented, political landscape, many political bosses have their own newspaper, and there are independent newspapers that can, for a price, be persuaded to carry articles favourable to a paymaster under the guise of news stories or features. According to African journalists themselves, various forms of bribery and of literary terrorism are common practice, variously labelled 'venderetta journalism', 'yellow journalism', and such like.<sup>66</sup> There is even a technique known as 'blackmail journalism', whereby unscrupulous journalists simply threaten to write a hostile story about someone and to desist only if bribed.<sup>67</sup> In short, the intellectual space opened up by freedom of the press in the early 1990s was quickly taken over by the very same entrepreneurs and their associates as constitute the political elites themselves, using often ruthless methods to pursue their interests. This was actually a key part of the process by which existing elites in many parts of the continent were able to neutralize the threat posed to their status by the turn to multi-party systems and to convert the instruments of democracy and freedom into means for the defence of privilege. This makes the African press an outstanding source for analyzing the nuances of politics but a generally poor source for anyone seeking an impartial view of events.

Even those African newspapers that do seriously aspire to be a journal of record are severely hampered by the nature of the societies in which they exist, with prevailing low salaries (encouraging journalists, therefore, to seek extra sources of income), poor communications, a 'plurality of publics',<sup>68</sup> rather than a single civic life, few local newspapers to act as feeders of information to the national press, and so on. It is hard to think of a single newspaper anywhere in Africa that could be regarded as a guide to 'All the news that's fit to print', as the *New York Times* claims to be. But none of this disqualifies the press as a prime source for the historian of Africa today. The important thing is to inquire into the nature of a publication, or even of a particular article, before using it as a source. Some African newspapers and magazines have a reputation for being reasonably impartial, although this doesn't necessarily make them accurate, while others might be known as being close to a particular person or party or to be liable to throw their columns open to all comers in return for payment. Particular stories can be evaluated partly by reference to the identity of their author, their position in a newspaper (for example, as features, news stories, letters, question-and-answer interviews, etc.), the sources they cite in support of particular information, and the verifiability of such information by other sources. Handled with prudence, the press can be a prime source not only for political history but for all manner of social history as well.

One of the most intriguing and potentially informative features of the African press is the frequent appearance of articles that purport to be news stories but that, to a reader familiar with European or North American history but for all manner of social history as well.

(1993), 7.

<sup>68</sup> Claude Ake, 'What is the problem of ethnicity in Africa?', *Transformation*, 22 (1998), 594-5.

<sup>67</sup> Amadu Wurie Khan, 'Journalism and armed conflict in Africa: the civil war in *Kinshasa*, esp. 75-7.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Cornelis Nlandu-Tsasa, *La rumeur au Zaïre: radio-trottier à*

canons of journalism or information more generally, seem no more than rumour, gossip or even fairy-stories. Some of these, such as the many stories about witchcraft, miracles and other quasi-mystical phenomena, may appear deeply eccentric to a reader who believes that all news should consist of empirically verified fact.<sup>69</sup> In some of the most frivolous media, where it is not unknown for journalists to make up stories without moving from their desks, such stories may indeed be discounted, but when they appear in newspapers that are otherwise serious in tone and apparent intent, they provide a means of access to a key source for the history of Africa. Such articles may usefully be considered primarily as written forms of a style of communication that is pervasive in Africa, namely the unofficial, spoken news succinctly described by the French-African expression *radio trottoir* ('literally', 'pavement radio') and often rendered in English by the derogatory (and inadequate translation 'rumour'. The classic places where *radio trottoir* gathers and disseminates news are markets, places of refreshment, taxis and barbers' shops, but ministerial waiting-rooms and top people's places of leisure produce their own, upper-class, versions as well.<sup>70</sup> It is instructive to learn that in *ancien régime* Paris there were also known places where public rumours were aired, including on political matters, and that the news circulating there was sometimes written down in literary salons in violation of the convention that high politics were 'the King's secret'.<sup>71</sup> In Africa, as in eighteenth-century France, the fact that *radio trottoir* is popular does not therefore mean that it is exclusive to the masses.

At the risk of simplification, it could be said that newspapers and media generally in the industrialized world depend on the convention that verbal information not emanating from an appropriate public authority has no status as 'hard' news: it is considered mere rumour, and indeed an acute study of rumour in western societies points out that it is often analyzed in terms of some collective delusion or pathology, using a psychiatric or medical metaphor that disqualifies it as a representation of reality.<sup>72</sup> In Africa, on the other hand, information conveyed unofficially by word of mouth is often taken by the general population, and even by elites, to be more accurate than information conveyed by the government or other formal institutions, which in any case is not always readily accessible due to the poor distribution of newspapers. While there is an abundant literature that laments this state of affairs as a sign of under-development, it could at the same time be seen as evidence of an element of democracy or at least of personal autonomy in Africa that is absent in industrialized countries. Strange as it may sound, Africans, although generally having access to a comparatively limited range of sources of information, are more at liberty than Europeans and North Americans to decide for themselves what is real or true, and less obliged to accept the information offered to them by what one of the founders of modern public relations, as early as 1928, called 'an invisible government which is the true ruling power', engaged in 'the conscious and intelligent

<sup>69</sup> Stephen Ellis, 'Reporting Africa', *Current History*, 99 (2000), 225-6.

<sup>70</sup> Stephen Ellis, 'Tuning in to pavement radio', *African Affairs*, 88 (1989), 321-30.

<sup>71</sup> Robert Darnton, 'Paris: the early Internet', *New York Review of Books*, 47, 11 (29

June 2000), 42.

<sup>72</sup> Jean-Noël Kapferer, *Rumeurs: le plus vieux média du monde* (Paris, 1987), 19-22. An

English translation was published in 1990.

many parts of West Africa, *radio trottoir* frequently reports stories, some ritual killings carried out by people in search of wealth or political power. Tracing this backwards in time, we find it recorded that in 1965 rumour were circulating in Ghana that President Nkrumah had caused people to be sacrificed to a deity described as the Goddess of the Volta River, in order to ensure the success of the Volta River construction project.<sup>79</sup> In the colonial Gold Coast too there were stories of people being killed for ritual purposes, and this can probably be connected to various religious practices in the Ashanti kingdom, and indeed in some other parts of pre-colonial West Africa.<sup>80</sup> Nor is it to be assumed that such rumours of killing carried out by people who believe that certain forms of blood sacrifice can serve to enhance their wealth and power always represent some sort of popular illusion or fantasy, since in some cases such stories may be based on actual practice. A similar set of historical antecedents for favourite themes of *radio trottoir* could probably be compiled for every single African country, and indeed something similar could be done for every country in the world. For the west has its favourite rumours too: the famous alligators-in-New-York-sewer urban legend was first recorded in 1843.<sup>81</sup>

In summary, then, any historian who wishes to study the political or social history of Africa in recent decades needs to consider *radio trottoir* as a primary source. How to interpret it is the problem. Although there is rather little literature suggesting how *radio trottoir* may be handled as a historical source a very considerable amount of academic attention has focused on closely related subjects such as the politics of memory and oral literature, often written by anthropologists or specialists in oral performance.<sup>82</sup> Historians of Africa have also produced an important corpus on oral history. Here, some of the classic works wrestle with how to extract dateable historical facts from oral performance. With this ultimate aim in mind, the earlier literature on this subject tried to identify the structure of oral traditions and to understand their inner logic. This, it was hoped, would clear the way for using them as sources of factual information.<sup>83</sup> This was done in the spirit of those historians, Bible scholars and classical philologists who had painstakingly assembled and compared different versions of ancient and medieval text with a view to identifying copyists' mistakes and deducing the original version of a document. This approach, however, has shown its limitations. To regard a present-day oral performance of stories about the past as though it were a degenerate version of an ancestral original is not without value, but

<sup>79</sup> Tetteh, *Anatomy of Rumour Mongering*, 38–9.  
<sup>80</sup> Richard Rathbone, *Murder and Politics in Colonial Ghana* (New Haven, 1993).  
<sup>81</sup> Emmanuel Teyssie, 'Le pouvoir, le sang et la mort dans le royaume asanante au dix-neuvième siècle', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 136 (1994), 549–61.  
<sup>82</sup> Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*, esp. 245–66.  
<sup>83</sup> Kapferer, *Rumours*, 49.  
<sup>84</sup> Amid a large literature, works I have found particularly illuminating include Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge, 1992) and John Rabian, *Moments of Freedom: Anthropology and Popular Culture* (Charlottesville, 1998).  
<sup>85</sup> The literature starts with Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition* (London, 1965; first French edn. 1961) and his later *Oral Tradition as History* (London, 1985); a neglected masterpiece is Alain Delivré, *L'histoire des rois d'Imérina: essai d'interprétation d'une histoire orale* (Paris, 1974).

manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses [that] is an important element in democratic society.<sup>78</sup> Control of information is undoubtedly one of the keys to political power in any circumstances, and for this reason African leaders often express their irritation with the popular tendency to prefer the anonymous offerings of *radio trottoir* to those of the state media, asserting, and perhaps even believing, that development is possible only if people accept that proper information is that relayed by a qualified elite of media managers, politicians and technocrats. Cameroon's President Paul Biya expressed this exactly in 1984 in the infamous statement that 'rumour is not the truth. Truth comes from above; rumour comes from below.'<sup>79</sup>

Compared with the inhabitants of industrialized continents, Africans have a tendency, alarming from the point of view of information managers, to believe things they have heard from their friends and neighbours even when official media assure them that these are not true. They can also put their own twist on what they read or hear through the mass media, such as the young people in Bamako who claim 'to have heard on the radio that condoms ... are actually infected with the AIDS virus and are being donated by agencies as part of a conspiracy by the West to control the Malian population'.<sup>80</sup> It is small wonder that governments in all parts of Africa pay enormous attention to *radio trottoir* as a vital barometer of public feeling and a key component of power.<sup>81</sup>

Although much of what is conveyed by *radio trottoir*, being spoken, escapes the historian's grasp, some of its output is written down in tracts or newspapers or in some other form.<sup>82</sup> African newspapers, in fact, can usefully be thought of as written forms of *radio trottoir* in some ways, to the point that these oral and written forms of communication need to be considered in the same bracket. Assembling information from transcripts of *radio trottoir*, it is striking that it shows consistent patterns in each single country and even across wide regions, suggesting the interest historians have in developing a suitable method for studying some of its favourite themes not just as aberrations or evidence of a 'moral panic', but as a royal way to mainstream ideas about society and politics.<sup>83</sup> To take just one example, in Ghana, as in

<sup>78</sup> Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda* (New York, 1928), 9.  
<sup>79</sup> *Cameroon Tribune*, no. 3080, 21 September 1984, quoted in Ellis, 'Tuning in to pavement radio', 325.  
<sup>80</sup> Mary Myers, 'Community radio and development: issues and examples from trans-Saharan West Africa', in Richard Fardon and Graham Furniss (eds.), *African Broadcast Cultures: Radio in Transition* (Oxford, 2000), 97, n. 6. Matthew Schoffeleers, 'The AIDS pandemic, the prophet Billy Chisupe and the democratization process in Malawi', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 39 (1999), 412–4, reports that many Malawians consider aid and AIDS to be closely connected.  
<sup>81</sup> On the attention paid, for example, by Nkrumah's government in Ghana, see M. N. Tetteh, *Anatomy of Rumour Mongering in Ghana* (Accra, 1976); on Zaire, Nlandu-Tsasa, *La rumeur au Zaïre*.  
<sup>82</sup> Nicolas Martin-Granel, 'Rumour sur Brazzaville: de la rue à l'écriture', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 33 (1999), 362–409; Jean-Claude Gakosso, *La nouvelle presse congolaise: du goulag à l'agora* (Paris, 1997), 59–65.  
<sup>83</sup> The same applies to many other parts of the world. See e.g. Anand A. Yang, 'A conversation of rumours: the language of popular mentalities in late nineteenth-century colonial India', *Journal of Social History*, 20 (1986–7), 485–505.

it risks overlooking the value of that performance as evidence of how people see things now, and of the nature of historical change as people perceive it. Even in pre-colonial times there probably never did exist in most societies any form of oral performance so pure and canonical that it can best be analyzed in this manner.<sup>86</sup>

All of this is useful to bear in mind when listening to, or reading transcripts of, *radio trottier*. The stories it retails may or may not have a basis in fact, but in the first instance they need to be considered as products of the imagination which are nevertheless believable to those who tell the stories, which have meaning, and which may therefore prompt people into action, as for example with southern and east African stories of vampires,<sup>87</sup> or witch-stories from all over the continent. For the academic historian in search of facts, a secondary operation may consist in regarding these stories as containing the germ of a verifiable fact. But even when a story concerns an action that is in itself perfectly feasible, such as a rumour of a coup attempt, it seems important for a historian to suppose that this should be investigated not only (or not primarily) as a clue to discernible facts but above all as the product of a social attempt to organize reality, which deserves to be analyzed as such. A search through the output of *radio trottier* in an effort to discover allegations that might be confirmed by other, more reliable, sources has value, but simply it may often be the most useful way of handling this particular medium. Political events are almost invariably more complex than simple truth or simple lies.<sup>88</sup> African politicians, knowing this and being aware of the nature of *radio trottier*, make prodigious efforts to convey an image of power through this medium.<sup>89</sup> For as Thomas Hobbes observed, 'Reputation of power, is Power; because it draweth with it the adherence of those that need protection'.<sup>90</sup>

*Radio trottier* – unofficial, anonymous – is usually conveyed in a group setting, where information is subject to a degree of control through assent. Also of value to historians are formal interviews with an individual witness to some matter under investigation. These are usually held in private. Interviews can be a source of major importance, with the usual precaution that individual speakers, like other sources, exist in a particular situation and have motives, which makes it imperative to gather material for comparison where possible. It is interesting to note that the biography of Kas Maine, mentioned above, is based on extensive interviews with the subject and members of his family, making maximum use of the often astonishing recall that people educated in cultures of the spoken word are capable of exercising. It is worth recalling that one of the greatest of all historians, Thucydides,

<sup>86</sup> Elizabeth Tonnkin, 'Investigating oral tradition', *Journal of African History*, 27 (1986), 203–13.  
<sup>87</sup> Louise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, 2000).  
<sup>88</sup> Louise White, 'The most telling: lies, secrets and history', *South African Historical Journal*, 42 (2000), 11–25.  
<sup>89</sup> For an example, Stephen Ellis, 'Rumour and power in Togo', *Africa*, 63 (1993), 462–76, set in context by Charles Piot, *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa* (Chicago 1999), 44–9.  
<sup>90</sup> Thomas Hobbes (C. B. Macpherson, ed.), *Leviathan* (1651; Pelican edn., London, 1968), 150.

worked largely in this way, regarding history as that which he could elicit through skillful questioning from people who could still remember the events he wanted to describe.<sup>91</sup> His example is important for historians of contemporary Africa, while it also serves as a riposte to anyone who maintains that good history can not be written about events that are still recent.

The stories or narratives of people recalling the past are not the same as fiction, although the two certainly have in common their use of imagination.<sup>92</sup> The best historians and the best novelists use an *a priori* imagination, that is, one which is not arbitrary but connects known facts (in the case of historians) or established points of their story (in the case of novelists).<sup>93</sup> It is striking just how accurately African novelists have sometimes taken the temperature of their societies, well before social scientists or other observers based in academic disciplines have reached the same point of understanding. Chinua Achebe, J. M. Coetzee, Ahmadou Kourouma and Ngugi wa Thiong'o are all examples of authors who have written novels that can be used by historians as guides to the political climate and even the political thought of a society at a given moment.<sup>94</sup>

Although historians of post-independence Africa will rarely have the quantity or precision of official documents at their disposal that historians of many other parts of the world can routinely expect, Africanists would be wrong to regard themselves as therefore being the poor relations of historians and of industrialized continents. Techniques for analyzing perception and meaningful belief in society at large are increasingly needed also in industrial societies, each with its share of unofficial beliefs, 'embod[y]ing a moral-political message'<sup>95</sup> at odds with the officially proclaimed truth. Above all, as an American media commentator has described the situation in his own country, 'journalism is becoming less a product than a process, witnessed in real time and public – first comes the allegation, then the anchor vamps and speculates until the counter-allegation is issued. The demand to keep up with this leaves journalists with less time to sort out what is true and what is spin.<sup>96</sup> A world of shadows where assertion and counter-assertion are plausible, where facts cannot be immediately discerned and the truth of a situation is not clear, extends to the west and not just Africa. The crucial difference is that in the west, where information has become a highly organized commodity, this contest is dominated by an elite group of professional manipulators with formidable technology at their disposal, leaving the public at a very considerable disadvantage, whereas in Africa

<sup>91</sup> Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 25–8.

<sup>92</sup> This has been the subject of an extensive theoretical debate, notably in a series of works by Hayden White suggesting that history-writing is similar to fiction in the sense of being a literary creation. For a summary and a response, see Roger Chartier, *Au bord de la falaise: l'histoire entre certitudes et incertitudes* (Paris, 1998), esp. 87–107.

<sup>93</sup> Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 240–2, 245–6.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Larry Diamond, 'Fiction as political thought', *African Affairs*, 88 (1989), 435–45.

<sup>95</sup> Jeffrey S. Victor, 'Social construction of Satanic ritual abuse and the creation of false memories', in Joseph De Rivera and Theodore R. Sarbin (eds.), *Believed-In Imaginings: The Narrative Construction of Reality* (Washington DC, 1998), 194.  
<sup>96</sup> Tom Rosenfield, quoted in the *Washington Post*, 2 March 1999.



most people participate on rather more even terms in the struggle to determine what is fact and what it means.

## STANDARDS OF TIME

This essay has argued that a new generation of contemporary histories is necessary if Africa is not to be thought of as existing in a temporal black hole. One of the characteristics of western thinking about Africa, according to one leading commentator at least, remains its tendency to think of Africa in terms of timelessness.<sup>97</sup> This may have been compounded by academics, even those with impeccably liberal motives, in the many works they have published on Africa since the 1970s that have been preoccupied by a discussion of what Africa should be or should have become. It is useful for historians to recall that their vocation is to write about what actually happened.

The first step in writing contemporary histories is to identify the character of Africa in its present age, which shows every sign of focussing attention on the 1970s rather than the era of independence as the time of the most significant change. This may then serve as a thread for constructing data-sets that could go back even into precolonial times. If this were pursued, it might in time lead to an identification of historical periods relevant to Africa's past that are more satisfactory than the current ones, setting colonialism into a broader context of the continent's passage through time. At a time when countries are more closely connected than ever (including Africa, despite its reputation for being internationally marginalised<sup>98</sup>), any rethinking of the fundamental changes that can define various epochs of Africa's past needs also to take into account the rhythms of the wider world.

This leads to a crucial point, for not all societies view the past in the same way, and not all live at the same tempo. It is disconcerting to wonder whether many parts of Africa have not, since the 1970s, come to adopt a rhythm out of step with the industrialised world, and that one symptom of this may be a decline in the knowledge of history (in its narrowest, academic sense) in African societies. In many parts of the continent there is a decrease in the use of formal archives by corporations, accompanied by a relative absence of the formal education whereby children learn history through a formal syllabus. Little heed is paid to academic history in many parts of Africa, even by people with a high standard of formal education. At the same time, academic writing of Africa's history is dominated by western writers and propagated in channels which barely touch Africa.

None of these assertions about the decline of academic history in Africa should be taken to imply that memories of times past have diminished in their power and importance. But memories of the past, whether or not based on fact, are not the same as history in its narrowest, academic sense. History can only make its weight felt on living generations through mechanisms or repositories of information that can become operational. Hence, it is important to know how Africans themselves perceive and recall their own past. They – like other people – do not act only or at all times in the light of rational choices about the likely outcomes of their behaviour. They also act – again, like everyone else – on the basis of repertoires transmitted from the past in the form of institutions, rituals, language or structure. These

<sup>97</sup> Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 1–23.

<sup>98</sup> Bayart, 'Africa in the world'.

repertoires of action are comparable to the grammatical rules that people use to govern the way in which they speak. In countries like Angola that are riven by conflict, different groups of people have different visions of the country's history to the point that they are hardly systematically researched but which is based on interviews in many African countries and which seems to receive support from more rigorous research,<sup>100</sup> is that many Africans today view their past much as the ancient Greeks did,<sup>101</sup> as divided into a recent time that may be rigorously and critically examined through discussion with people who remember it, preceded by a period of myth or social memory whose accuracy is unstable. It is possible that the majority of Africans have always thought of the past in this way, but certainly until recently they were governed by elites who had themselves had long exposure to formal, written histories, and by institutions with a bureaucratic memory, relayed by archives. These factors weigh less than they did twenty-five years ago in the substantial number of countries where institutions have eroded or are unable to govern the whole country and where those in power have little interest in bureaucratic rule of this type. If it is indeed the case that many Africans today have less reason and less opportunity than they had a generation ago to be aware of the existence of a 'scientific' history, in the sense of one written in the mode that has become conventional in industrialized countries, then this may contribute to what one of Africa's most thoughtful writers has described as a tendency to identify the past as a quasi-mythical element whose power can be seized by force. 'History', Achille Mbembe notes, 'in the last resort is considered to be part of a vast economy of witchcraft'.<sup>102</sup>

Africanist historians, who created a usable African history not so long ago, need to think hard about the nature of Africa today, and to think anew about the fundamental sub-categories into which its history may be divided now that the colonial period is gone. In doing this they need also to be aware that the object of their study, namely things that people have done in or concerning Africa, appears to be perceived increasingly in a radically different mode by the bulk of Africans themselves, one better understood as religious than as historical thought. This has considerable implications for what the African past and the African present are, and how they can be described. And indeed, it may contain valuable lessons for historians of the world as a whole.<sup>103</sup> The notion that Africa today is post-colonial is hardly satisfactory, not least because of the continuing reference to the colonial past in this epithet. Also unsatisfactory is the suggestion from the South African government that now is the age of the African Renaissance. Nor is the notion that Africa is in the age of globalization of great use.<sup>104</sup> Some other labels that academics have sought to apply to present-day Africa are even less con-

<sup>99</sup> Sousa Jamba, 'The idea of Angola', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 8 June 2001.

<sup>100</sup> E. G. Rabian, *Moments of Freedom*, 87–101; Tamaras Giles-Vernick, 'Doh: trans-lating an African environmental history of loss in the Sangha River basin of equatorial Africa', *Journal of African History*, 41 (2000), 373.

<sup>101</sup> Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 24–5.

<sup>102</sup> Achille Mbembe, 'A propos des écritures africaines de soi', *Politique africaine*, 77 (2000), 25–6.

<sup>104</sup> Frederick Cooper, 'What is the concept of globalization good for?'

vincing, such as the suggestion by two prominent anthropologists that Africa is entering what they term 'the Age of Futitarianism', said to be the period 'wherein postmodern pessimism runs up against the promises of late capitalism'.<sup>105</sup> The problem with this formulation, other than its lack of elegance, is precisely its lack of historical precision, whereas Africa needs more than ever a contemporary history that is sensitive to the depth of time.

It is no longer an age of development or national liberation in Africa. The discussion is open as to what sort of an age it really is, in the sense of determining the characteristics that distinguish Africa now from Africa in the last identifiable period. Perhaps one should think less in terms of African history and more in terms of a world history in which Africa has its part. 'All the labels we put on periods are *ex post facto*; the character of an epoch can only be perceived by those looking back on it from outside. That is why we must be content for the present with a provisional name for the "post-modern" period in which we live', Barraclough wrote in 1964, in a strikingly early use of the term 'post-modern'.<sup>106</sup> It is already possible to see a dividing line in Africa's history in the 1970s, and even if the character of the current age is unclear, at least that of the one preceding it should by now have become easier to grasp. But it would be frivolous merely to think of names that, like advertising slogans, are designed primarily to stick in the mind. The main task at hand is to inquire into the nature of recent times diligently and, above all, without the burden of past expectations. It may then turn out that, for all the terrible events and formidable problems of recent years, it is not an age of nihilism.

<sup>105</sup> Jean and John L. Comaroff, 'Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: notes from the South African postcolony', *American Ethnologist*, 26 (1999), 279.

<sup>106</sup> Barraclough, *An Introduction to Contemporary History*, 15.