

# HISTORY IN AFRICA

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“AFRICANS have no history.” This familiar assertion has always acted as a justification for denouncing Africans as savages—or as near to savages as makes no difference.

It must therefore be a vital part of the African awakening to recover the memory and the fact of African history. That is why the first conference of independent African States, held at Accra in 1958, did good service to the cause of emancipation when it declared that: “We shall encourage and strengthen studies of African culture and history and geography in the institutions of learning of the African States . . .”

What are the independent countries—more numerous now than in 1958—doing to make good this pledge? The answer is that they are doing something, but not much. Not enough.

There is plenty of reason to excuse this. To begin with, they have had very little time to elaborate and realise programmes of research in the fields of history and archaeology. Such programmes require long preparation, skilled workers, sacks of money. All these desiderata have been necessarily lacking in independent Africa. Even if the Government of the Republic of the Sudan, for example, had felt able to devote a considerable slice of its slender resources to the saving and excavation of the great sites of ancient Kush and Nubia—sites now threatened with imminent inundation by the projected high dam at Assuan—it could have achieved only a tithe of the work. The best equipped of States and the wealthiest of Governments would need long years to recover the complex knowledge of the past that these sand-buried palaces and cities undoubtedly conceal.

And aside from time and money, independent Africa needs scholars and workers who are trained in the necessary disciplines—and here again the lack of these cannot possibly be made good either quickly or easily. It must also be a serious question whether newly-independent States ought to encourage their all-too-rare postgraduate students to concentrate on historical studies which, however important for the ultimate growth of African culture, cannot in the nature of things yield rapid results.

Yet it would be wrong to imagine that nothing is being done. Ghana, for example, has lately provided funds for a long-term programme of historical research into the origins and culture of

the Akan peoples who compose so large a part of her population. This programme will be a valuable companion project to the historical studies now being pursued by Nigerian scholars under the sponsorship of the Federal and Western Regional Government of Nigeria. One of the best African history books of recent years has come from the pen of a Nigerian historian; and it must be an encouragement to all historians that Dike, its author, should now preside over the fortunes of Ibadan University College. This—like the presence there of Biobaku, another Nigerian historian—is a guarantee that continued interest in Nigerian history will not fail.

In the same way one may note with pleasure that the Sudanese Government, though unable of its own resources to recover the grandeur of Meroe, has facilitated the work of foreign expeditions; and one of these—that of Hintze of the Humboldt University of Berlin—is already deep into Meroitic discovery. In East Africa there is new scope for the study of *African* history at the University College of Makerere in Uganda; and the British Treasury's agreement to provide a substantial annual grant towards the foundation and expansion of a new East African Institute of History and Archaeology is another good sign of the times. Steady results are also coming to hand in several of the French-speaking countries of Africa. Even in strife-torn Rhodesia—Southern and Northern—archaeologists like Clark and Summers and Robinson have found means to throw much new light, these last few years, on the true beginnings and nature of the great stone-building cultures of the southern African Iron Age. Lately, too, the Nuffield Foundation has provided grants for the staff of the Rhodes-Livingstone Museum to conduct valuable research into Northern Rhodesian Iron Age sites; and Chaplin and Fagan are now embarked on work of great importance in this field.

All this—and here I have offered only a few stray examples—makes a valid contribution to Africa's rediscovery of itself. The importance of history is very much in the air of nationalist Africa today. Only a few weeks ago an African from Moçambique, briefly visiting London, went out of his way in conversation to emphasize the importance which, quite rightly, he felt should attach to a proper archaeological survey of Moçambique—a country, one may add, that is practically blank on the archaeological map but is certainly rich in Iron Age sites and ruins. And one could surely double this observation in any African land where the wind of freedom blows.

This new interest in Africa is happily paralleled by a new interest in Europe. At least half-a-dozen important studies in pre-European African history are now going through the press in Britain and France. History books for the general reader have begun to appear in London and Paris; and, so far as one can judge, they are being widely read. Much credit for this development must go to the School of Oriental and African Studies of London University for its two memorable conferences on African history and archaeology, one in 1953 and the other in 1957.

At least one important lesson now clearly emerges. It is that the study of African culture in the past cannot sensibly or helpfully be limited to separate and unco-ordinated research within the new national frontiers. Many of these frontiers are merely the inheritance of arbitrary colonial divisions; and some of them, at least, are bound to disappear in the near future. One or two (notably between Senegal and ex-French Sudan, and between British and Italian Somalia) have already disappeared. The study of African history is manifestly the study of a great diversity of societies—but it is also, and no less, the study of an underlying and essential unity between many of these cultures. No scholar any longer expects, for example, to be able to explain the walls of Zimbabwe by merely Rhodesian data: for the origins and governing motives of the men who built these walls, research now looks increasingly beyond Rhodesia—to Angola, to the Congo, even to Nigeria. And one could apply the same lesson to other African cultures which have achieved greatness in the past.

One may well ask if the time may not have come when independent Africa should go a step beyond its pledge of 1958—and give some practical confirmation, in the field of historical studies, to this fact of unity-in-diversity. If London University can hold intensely rewarding conferences that range far and wide across Africa for their themes and discussions, may it not be right for African Universities to begin to do the same? Is the moment really premature for the foundation of a co-ordinating centre, in Africa, for historical and archaeological research? Would not this sort of co-ordinating central institution be a strong and useful incentive for young graduates to choose careers in history and archaeology? As things stand today, there is a desperate shortage of African graduates who are qualified to collect African tradition, rewrite the story of their own countries, re-interpret the findings of the past, and build for the future a picture of their Continent that is true, dignified, and complete.