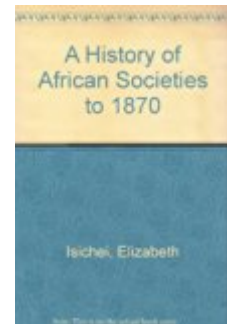


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elizabeth Isichei. *A History of African Societies to 1870*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. x + 578 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 0-521-45441; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-45444-5.

Reviewed by Charles W. McClellan (Radford University)
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A reading of *A History of African Societies to 1870* impresses one with the fact that it is written by a “teacher” of African history, not merely an academic. Certainly, there are many good scholarly histories of Africa, but few that have been written with the average undergraduate student in mind. In Isichei’s pages one can almost hear the questions asked by students over the years, and her careful working out of the answers: current, nuanced, and comprehensible, but not at all simplistic.

Isichei warns of her intention to hold “conversations” with differing versions of the African past, hers prominent among those voices (p. 3). Unfortunately this dialogue is not as central to the work as one is led to believe. Historians are shaped both by what they are and what they are becoming. Themes and interpretations change, and Isichei unabashedly admits that her own views have evolved and that earlier opinions may have been faulty. That is an intellectual honesty that can be appreciated.

The writing of a history that encompasses the whole of a continent is daunting, and for Africa particularly so. Establishing consistent chronology or continuity of theme is problematic. Such becomes easier in the context of regional divisions, but even there some discontinuity remains. Isichei has chosen a flexible approach to these problems. Chronologically, she divides her work into three periods: prior to 1000 C.E., up to the 16th century, and finally up to ca. 1870, although these dates are never absolute markers for her. She draws forth half a dozen themes to provide focus, and at the same time subdivides the continent into regions, although her definition of these regions is not consistent (and she does not really explain why she configures them as she does). For example, in Part II, there is a separate chapter on North-

east Africa, but in Part III, Northeast Africa is subsumed within one on Northern Africa.

Isichei insists that hers will be an Africa-centered work, and it is. This is one in which the European explorers are hardly mentioned, and Boer history in South Africa gets much less space than does the Khoisan. She is determined that hers will be a more inclusive history, one that focuses not merely upon Great States and Big Men. She endeavors to include discussions of a variety of “stateless” peoples, often little studied. Such effort is commendable, but the final result is to add further to the discontinuity since these are societies more likely to have been studied by anthropologists than by historians. Isichei can not ignore the Big Men and the redistributive nature of their power bases. It will be interesting to see how she will contrast people such as Shaka, Samori, and Mkwawa in 19th century Africa with Idi Amin, Mobutu sese Seko, and Jerry Rawlings as her next volume unfolds.

There is great effort as well to emphasize the role of women in African history, as rulers, warriors, mediums and religious leaders, as well as primary economic producers. Much on the roles of women in Africa has been produced by scholars over the last twenty years and its inclusion here is a strong point, although at times it appears, much as it does in other history textbooks, as something that has been purposely appended almost as an afterthought, rather than as material that is integral to the narrative.

Prominent among her themes is an emphasis on the environment and the ways in which it has challenged African societies, shaping social, political, economic, and religious institutions. Drought and famine have been constants in African history and remain so. There is too

little appreciation of Africa's environmental history although that is a fully-evolving field of study today. These issues are fully related to the question of production, another of Isichei's emphases.

These are concerns not only with who produces, what is produced, and how, but with issues such as the historic interaction between gatherer-hunter, pastoral and agricultural societies; the roles of craft producers and domestic slaves; the gender orientation of production; and how control of production and accumulation impacts political and religious power.

Isichei also challenges our conceptions of ethnic identity. Too frequently we think of ethnic groups as static, frozen in time and space. Isichei provides evidence of peoples of who have changed their ethnic identities because of environmental pressures or changing modes of production. Even more basically she notes groups who although they share the same language have developed ethnic identities that are substantially different.

Although I am generally impressed with Isichei's effort here, the question remains for me as a teacher: would I would utilize her book in the classroom? On that question I have some mixed feelings. Each of us, of course, must make that individual determination. Some of us teach African history in one-semester; others have extended courses. Some of us teach mostly underclassmen; others majors at the upper level.

There are parts of Isichei that would be useful for my students to read. I would particularly recommend chapter 1 which is a general overview of the themes, sources and schools of thought in African history. In fact the whole of Part I might be effectively used as a brief, but cogent, introduction to early African history, dealing with issues such as man's evolution, economic lifestyles, metals technology, the Bantu expansion, age-grade systems, lineages and clans, cults, languages and the arts. I would also recommend her treatment of the slave trade, particularly as related to central and western Africa. Without overwhelming, Isichei does a good job of laying out the historiographical questions and summarizing the debates that revolve around them.

The regional portions of the book I have a bit more trouble with. For the general reader, they are more dense and complex. The lack of integration makes them harder to read and digest. And Isichei's themes tend to get lost. Her work is of course a reflection of the sources available and the progress of Africanist scholarship, but as she moves from society to society her description is often rather uneven. For some societies such as Asante or the ancient empire of Songhai, she has abundant sources and in fact her description seems terse. Elsewhere as with the Tio or Bisa, she seems somewhat hard pressed and relies more heavily on anthropological data. She seems to be struggling to achieve some semblance of balance so that one society will not appear more important than any other.

Isichei tries hard to incorporate oral traditions into her work and by in large she does a good job. Occasionally, oral material in the text leaves the reader wondering about its meaning or inclusion. I will refrain from commenting on her historical analysis here (others will surely do that), but suffice it to say that, as an Ethiopianist, I believe that not all my colleagues will fully accept her interpretation of Ethiopian history. I suspect that other regionalists will find similar fault with her analysis of their corners of the continent. In fact that is a certainty.

I would wish to end this review on a positive note. Every African history text that I have ever examined had certain deficiencies. Few of us will ever have the expertise or energy to undertake the task that Isichei has. It is easy to be an armchair critic. Given the immensity of the task, we must appreciate the fact that such works cannot be all things to all people, although I think Isichei has honestly tried. Hers I find a fairly well balanced work that reflects the current status of African studies. Many will find much to praise in the work, and as I indicated in the beginning, I for one, will very much look forward to what she has to say about African history in the 20th century.

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