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Christopher Ehret. *Civilizations of Africa: A History to 1800.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002. xii + 480 pp. $22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8139-2085-6.

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A Different Kind of Introductory African Text

Christopher Ehret is the latest senior scholar to weigh in with a new text for teaching African history to undergraduates. He limits the text to a time frame near his own specialty in early African history. The text covers what many instructors, myself included, cover in the first semester of a two-semester sequence of introductory courses to African history, or the first two quarters of a three-quarter sequence. Many instructors find this first part of the sequence very difficult to teach. It can cover everything from human origins to the origins of agriculture, Egypt, Africa and classical antiquity, the origins of metal working and "Bantu expansion," Islam and increased trade, and the rise of the slave trade. Instructors often have great difficulty in finding coherence in such a large chunk of historical space and time.

Early African history, though, is the place where the innovative and interdisciplinary nature of the field of African history, within the discipline, has been most apparent. Lacking written sources, Africanist historians have used archaeology, linguistics, the elevation of oral tradition from folklore and ethnography to historical source, and, most recently, data from the environmental sciences on climate change to pioneer new methods of historical reconstruction. For more than three decades, Ehret has been in the front lines of these battles. He has had a huge impact on the development of the field as a scholar, as a mentor (together with his many distinguished colleagues at UCLA over the years), and as a member of the profession. Ehret's work has been and remains controversial. Over the course of his career he has used linguistic history to create a grand narrative of African history before the modern era. Using what he labels the "comparative method," Ehret has attempted to reconstruct the history of language change and movement. He has moved from original case studies in East Africa to a continental scale. His methods and conclusions have come under heavy criticism from historians, archaeologists, and linguists. Ehret's willingness to put dates on his reconstruction of language divisions and on the spread of innovations within languages has led to charges of "crypto-glottochronology," the discredited simple connection of language difference and time. His willingness to associate languages with archaeological cultures leads some archaeologists to fits, but not perhaps as much as his implicit and explicit calls for archaeologists to search for validation for his own linguistically derived conclusions. His willingness to emphasize language as a preeminent determinant of culture comes in for its share of attack. Given his willingness to focus on the grand narrative despite his critics, he would seem well placed to produce a survey text.

And so he has. This text provides a grand narrative for the period from about 30,000 years ago up to at least the rise of Islam and in many ways to the beginning of the modern era (if one takes the maritime revolution as marking the beginning of that era). Ehret does so by taking the term "civilization" and using it to mean an association of linguistic and material items that can be linked together from linguistic historical analysis and archaeology. His civilizations are in fact the four major language families indigenous to Africa: Afrasan (or Afro-Asiatic), Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo, and Khoisan. He connects this schema to archaeological cultures in ways that specialists might find questionable if applied to every single archaeological site but seems broadly consistent with the evidence. He often judiciously notes where his conclusions lack full confirmation. He places at the forefront the development of subsistence strategies and technology, focusing on the spread of food production in Africa. Yet Ehret also provides a fairly detailed discussion of the development of political institutions and religious ideas and practices based on linguistic reconstruction. He follows the changes of his four civilizations as they spread across the continent. As Ehret moves his narrative closer to the present, he uses archaeological and documentary sources to inform more detailed discussions of particular

societies at particular moments. Moving into the Islamic age, and hence into the period where at least some documentary evidence exists, he keeps the narrative firmly focused on the dynamics of African societies. By the beginning of what he calls the Atlantic Age (after 1500), the focus on his four civilizations begins to waver a little as the histories of diverging separate societies differentiate themselves from his common civilizations.

Having outlined Ehret's basic approach to African history in his text, the remainder of this review will address three specific questions. First, is Ehret's basic approach valid as a meta-narrative for African history? Second, if it is, does Ehret in this text make the best case for it? And finally, how effective is this approach and this text in teaching undergraduates African history? I will admit to having lived with this book for a while now. Several months before, I was asked to review the volume, I read the book and decided to use it in the first semester of a two-semester introduction to African history sequence at Texas Southern, a historically black university in Houston. I chose the volume over the available options because it emphasized the interaction between human societies and their environments over the very long run and provided a depth of detail about the very earliest eras of African history not found in any other text. At the end of the semester, I asked my students to share with me their impressions of the volume.

The great strength of this volume lies in the robust analytical framework Ehret has developed. Yet that strength relies on what would seem to be the most contested element of Ehret's work. He bases much of the work on the development of different languages out of mother languages as a sign of social and technological change. The amount of work he can draw on to make such conclusions is truly impressive. His own recent syntheses form much of the background to this volume, but it also draws on the work of his students and of many others in both linguistic history and linguistics itself.[1] He is extremely well read in the archaeological and environmental science literatures.

Ehret does an effective job of selling his model. The first four chapters lay out a comprehensive scheme for the development of African societies, from the beginnings of the development of his separate civilizations through the development of food production to the spread of Bantu languages across the continent. In these sections, he presents a radical interpretation of the data available. He consistently pushes the dates for the origins of crop cultivation back beyond those of most archaeologists. He begins with a date of about 13,000 BCE for intensive grain collection by Afrasan speaking peoples. He dates true food production to the Holocene optimum climate regime around 9000 BCE when speakers of Sudanic languages combined intensive grain collection with the domestication of cattle. He argues that cattle keeping then spread north into North Africa among Afrasan speaking peoples before the spread of goats and sheep into the region from southwest Asia. He dates the origins of yam cultivation to about 8000 BCE in West Africa. He charts the history of elaboration with influences spreading both north and south in the northern half of Africa. Along the way, he cites evidence for the second earliest invention of pottery and the earliest invention of cotton weaving. Finally, he claims the evidence shows an independent invention of iron working at some point before 1000 BCE in the area broadly between Lake Chad and Lake Nyanza (Victoria). On top of these claims, he comments on religious beliefs and social practices based on the reconstruction of retentions and borrowings in languages, arguing that Saharo-Sahelian generally believed in one high god, which he calls monotheism, while Afrasan speakers generally believed in clan deities.

This synthesis is truly radical; but is it right? For these early periods, many arguments are not yet supported by archaeology. Before the evidence from Nabta Playa in western Egypt became fully integrated into our understanding of these issues, few would have dated food production in sub-Saharan Africa before 3000 BCE, and most would have argued that cattle as well as sheep and goats diffused into Africa from southwest Asia. Since then, more have been willing to at least speculate that food production originated much earlier in Africa.[2] Yet the evidence remains indirect. While grindstones are common from sites in the Sahara, many point out that these can indicate intensive exploitation of wild grasses rather than true agriculture. Likewise, many of his conclusions concerning religious beliefs have been contested as having multiple interpretations. Finally, even the old debate over copper and iron is not fully settled, with some scholars still seeing merit in younger dates for iron working allowing for diffusion from North Africa. As scholarship, Ehret's conclusions are a valid enough starting place for questioning the evidence or designing research programs, but his conclusions are not all validated by detailed research.

Ehret's presentation requires much from the instructor in terms of contextualization. Ehret presents his conclusions as valid without discussing the scholarship behind them or the debates about them. As an instructor, I felt compelled to spend much time in class outlining some of the debates around Ehret's conclusions and the meth-

ods he and other scholars used in reaching them. Such an exercise proved a strength of the class, in my opinion, but it got little help from Ehret's text. He provides very few bibliographic citations and only occasionally discusses the debates around his arguments. At the end of each chapter, he provides brief notes for students and teachers. These I found not particularly enlightening; they could provide a perfect opportunity for discussing the scholarship around his arguments.

A second element of Ehret's approach also becomes more problematic, especially as the book moves through time. While certainly alive to the ways people and cultures interact, the overall effect of much of his analysis is to focus on language as the carrier of culture. This focus, in turn, often overemphasizes retentions at the expense of innovations and borrowings. This problem arises more in the presentation of a volume like this one than in Ehret's scholarship, but teaching this method to a classroom full of African Americans who do not feel that the Indo-European, Germanic roots of their language says much about their culture does give one pause. Again, I hope it has led my students to some productive discussions about these issues.

The last four chapters of the book which cover the period from 300 to 1800 were for me the most problematic to teach. Ehret retains his focus on the growing diversity of languages and cultures which leads to what seems, at times, an increasingly shotgun effect to the presentation. Each chapter presents almost a laundry list of societies and states giving some details about each. Ehret's original emphasis of "four civilizations" recedes, not totally out of the picture, but to the background, as it should, given the increasing diversity of African societies. Throughout these sections, Ehret also tries to maintain a focus on the internal dynamics of African societies. Again, this focus is laudable and useful for teaching. But sometimes I felt Ehret has over-corrected for the external orientation of popular conceptions of Africa's past. I think it is important for students to understand the history of Islam in Africa from ca. 700 CE on and of the rise of the Atlantic world and the modern world system after 1500. Ehret really only mentions these themes rather than making them a central part of his analysis. I believe both are central for different regions of Africa and can be made part of a cohesive survey of African history while maintaining Ehret's focus on African dynamics. He makes very little mention of literate sources for African history. This lack reflects his emphasis on African dynamics, but again not only fails to account for an imperfect but increasingly important source for African history as he moves through the volume, but also serves to de-emphasize the connections between Africans and outsiders from the beginning of the Islamic era on.

In particular, I think Ehret's presentation of the Atlantic trade after 1500, especially the slave trade, does not do justice to the importance of that trade for African or world history. He does more than adequately discuss the histories of several regions involved in the trade, but because he does not make trade with Europeans a compelling focus of the narrative, the issue gets lost. He does not even mention the numbers of Africans involved in the trade, a pointed absence given his willingness to go out on a limb about earlier periods of African history. Even given the contested nature of such issues, I have found that the slave trade is one of the entry points into African history my students have always brought to my classes and to de-emphasize it as a theme, where appropriate and given the proper context of local dynamics, risks losing a critical point of engagement between peoples inside and outside Africa.

Despite my comments above, I enjoyed using this book in the classroom. It spoke much better to the foundations of African civilizations than any other one available in field. It certainly gives the most comprehensive coverage to the very early history of the peoples of the continent. Trying to give students some idea of the debates surrounding issues like language change, the origins of agriculture and metal working, and the spread of Bantu languages challenged me to revisit some of the literature. Bringing a more thorough discussion of the impact of Islam and of the Atlantic trade would make it better, but the volume still gives more than enough information. Likewise more discussion of methodology and the debates about important issues, perhaps in the annexes to each chapter, would be helpful. The maps are very good and while the black-and-white pictures, mostly of African artifacts and art objects, are well labeled and sometimes striking, they do not always add a great deal to the text.

More important questions, perhaps, relate to both how students reacted to the text and how much they learned using it. Here, based on my students' comments, the text worked very well. Ehret's structure gave them a solid frame around which to build their acquisition of new knowledge. Some students came into the class with some experience with African issues and others with none. Both groups seemed to find the text useful. Many came to understand the provisional nature of some of the arguments Ehret presents and were quite willing to pursue extra readings and debate them.

The result is that the strengths of this volume far out-

weigh its weaknesses, especially given its competition. It is the work of a veteran teacher speaking with both passion and authority. I will certainly use the volume again. I would advise, though, that others be prepared to use supplemental readings to fill in the gaps left here.

Notes

[1]. Ehret, *An African Classical Age: Eastern and Southern Africa in World History, 1000 B.C. to A.D. 400* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998); and *Reconstructing Proto-Afroasiatic (Proto-Afrasian): Vowels, Tone, Consonants, and Vocabulary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[2]. See Fred Wendorf and Romuald Schild, "Late Neolithic Megalithic Structures at Nabta Playa (Sahara), Southwestern Egypt," http://www.comp-archaeology.org/WendorfSAA98.htm for a readily accessible account, and Fred Wendorf and Romuald Schild, "Nabta Playa and Its Role in Northeastern African Prehistory," *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 17, no. 2 (1998): pp. 97-123.

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