1 Introduction

Understanding the Contours of Africa's Past

The stories of entire continents cannot adequately be told in single-volume histories. It is a matter of debate, indeed, why individual (or groups of) historians actually do what they do, and even more so, what it is that they aim to achieve. But in a volume such as this, the aim is – indeed, can only be – to grasp key ideas, and apply them broadly; to appreciate thematic coherence while equally recognizing discord in this regard; to identify overall processes while paying due attention to the individuals and whirlpools which make up the great flow of human history. It is a sad but inevitable truth that in writing wide-ranging survey histories of peoples – even where, as in this one, the timeframe is carefully capped – the number of individual lives which are mentioned is infinitesimal, *vis-à-vis* the millions of lives which are actually lived. Yet above all the aim in a book like this is to do justice to Africa and Africans. If this is even approached, then the author can be, if not content, then at least somewhat relieved.

This book is concerned with the past two centuries, a timeframe which is not simply a matter of organizational convenience: rather, the central idea is that Africa's twentieth century cannot be understood in isolation from its nineteenth century, and that transformative processes – political, social, and economic – span the entire period under examination, and are distinctive to it. We return to this later. More broadly, it is important, at the outset, to elucidate some of the core themes which run through the narrative, whether explicitly or implicitly. The continent remained underpopulated until the second half of the twentieth century, and thus a host of states and societies were concerned first and foremost with the maximization of numbers. As a result African ideologies were frequently centered around the celebration of fertility, and myths of creation around the carving of civilization out of wilderness, and its subsequent defence against Nature. Fertility and reproductive capacity were sought through polygamy; control of people – frequently through the practice of slavery, for example – was more significant as

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a feature of social organization than control of land, which was plentiful, with a handful of important exceptions, as we shall see. Thus, for example, West African history is characterized by frequently violent competition for women, because women underpinned male status, worked land, and produced children who would do likewise. Across the continent more generally, intergenerational conflict among men over women was common. Marriage was very much a public rather than a private affair, involving alliances between lineages; the distribution of women represented socio-political arrangements. Of course the status of women themselves varied greatly across the continent, ranging from low and exploited, to respected, influential, and economically independent.

One of the major challenges for ruling elites across the continent – in the nineteenth century as in more recent decades – was the construction of permanent systems of governance by which large numbers of people might be controlled. Underpopulated regions in particular were often characterized by the instability of the polity, and by the failure of would-be state-builders to extend their control beyond the "natural" limits imposed by demography and geography. In underpopulated areas, discontented people might rebel against the existing order – forming an "armed frontier" which might march on the center, or otherwise consume it – but they might just as easily migrate beyond the reach of that order, in so doing often causing its very downfall. This constant cycle of violent fission and fusion drove much political and social change in Africa, and it was an increasingly violent process in the nineteenth century with the emergence of new polities and social systems. Territorial states with ambitions beyond the immediate community had to overcome the problem of how to ensure loyalty across a wider area, and how to create supra-provincial identities. The problem is exemplified by the situation in the West African savannah, where states and empires have historically been confronted with localism and segmentation. The savannah was characterized by countless local communities, groups of villages which formed miniature states, known as *kafu*; the *kafu* symbolized the localism of African politics, and empire-builders had both to construct their polities around them, and to dominate them through military force and control of wealth. Again, this is as true in the colonial and post-colonial eras as it was in the nineteenth century. Throughout the book, then, we are concerned with the emergence of identities, local, regional, even continental, over time, and the dynamics involved in the shaping of those identities.

In understanding the continent's history over the past two centuries, moreover, due emphasis needs to be placed on the *longue durée* as well as on dramatic change; there has been much continuity as well as upheaval between the eighteenth and the twenty-first centuries, and in many respects colonialism – the focus of the bulk of Africanist scholarship in recent decades – constituted a mere "moment" in time, with a variable impact across the continent. Firstly, Africa's nineteenth century was a period of violent reformation, of political destruction and reconstruction, and the effects of this prolonged transformation continued to be felt deep into the twentieth century and beyond, especially during, and in the wake of, decolonization. Secondly, these internal processes of change need to be understood at least partly against the backdrop of emerging patterns of external economic relations – in essence, between Africa and the northern Atlantic economies – in the course of the nineteenth century. In many

respects, colonial rule was only the latest manifestation of a Westernized commercial system – fundamentally disadvantageous, in terms of modern ideas about development, to African producers, though not necessarily to the elites who governed them – which long pre-dated it. Colonialism, then, was clearly significant in its own terms, as will be demonstrated in the course of the story which follows. Arguably, it had the greatest impact through the manner of its departure, in the sense that it left much of the continent ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of independence. But colonial rule must be contextualized: with regard to internal political development, it was in many respects co-opted into ongoing African processes of change, while in terms of external economy it represented only the latest stage of a system which had been a long time in the making. What came after it – the era of the "post-colony" and the "new" international order – must be understood in terms of what preceded it. What is certainly clear is that colonial rule was in many ways as African as it was European, and cannot be understood as some great unilateral imposition: Africans shaped their own societies in the age of foreign rule much more effectively than any colonial official or European government could, even in the face of – and to a large extent in response to – an aggressively extractive external economic system.

Social, political, and economic change, moreover – as with every other human community – was represented in African art and material culture. This is not a subject to which this volume has been able to devote much space, unfortunately; nonetheless, suffice to observe here that aesthetic endeavors often provide vital clues to African political as well as culture life. Art was a mediation between the living and the dead, and thus often underpinned political power, as well as attempting to ensure agricultural prosperity; sculptures represented – as with story-telling – social and political commentary and critique. Belief in the supernatural and the afterlife shaped Egyptian art and architecture, as it did along much of the Nile valley, notably in Nubia; Christianity spurred artistic achievement in the Ethiopian highlands, and Islam did the same along the east African coast and across the western African savannah. African craftsmen – working in terracotta, gold, copper, brass, bronze, wood, and stone – told stories of the formation of kingship, the struggle against Nature, and the quest for fecundity; they produced material cultures which were both aesthetically pleasing and had socio-political utility, as they projected ideas about group cohesion or reinforced hierarchy. The spread of artistic styles, moreover, was the result both of political upheaval – population movement on the back of the slave trade, for example, or of widespread conflict – and commercial interaction. Traders brought culture as well as commodities, and networks of artistic exchange opened up in the pre-colonial era just as trading systems did. Africans borrowed from one another, and adapted styles accordingly; and so too did external influence come to have an important impact on local art forms. Islamic input, again, is evident in Swahili architecture, notably, and later European colonialism influenced the form which African artistic expression took in certain areas.

Indeed, another of the core issues that arises in a study of Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is the continent's relationship with the rest of the world in general, and of course Europe in particular. Readers of this book need to appreciate, from the outset, the degree to which Africa has been judged, or measured, by the

"outside world"; this has happened to a remarkable degree, and continues to happen in much the same way, both subliminally and more consciously, down to the present day. Clearly, important external influences have been brought to bear on African cultural, economic, and political development. Islam was the most important such influence before the nineteenth century, first coming to the continent through Egypt and the Red Sea, from whence it spread across the Maghreb, as well as travelling up the Nile valley into northern and central Sudan; it would become established in the Horn, too, in the Somali plains and the Ogaden. From northern Africa it would move via trade routes into the Sudanic belt and across West Africa, where it remains the dominant faith today. In sub-Saharan East Africa, too, Islam was a critical component of Swahili civilization. Overall, Islam would shape African culture and society, linking swathes of the continent to a dynamic and expanding Muslim world. The coming of Islam also involved the emergence of a long-distance slave trade, across the Sahara and linking the continent to the Middle East, the Arabian peninsula, and the Indian Ocean. European influence, arguably, was much less than that of Islam before the nineteenth century, certainly in terms of direct cultural and political change: missionary activity, for example, beginning with the Portuguese in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, had limited success, and white settlement was negligible outside the Dutch colony at the southern Cape. Europe was largely restricted to trading posts and forts on the coast. Europeans did, however, introduce new crops to Africa from the Americas, and cassava, maize, groundnuts, and tobacco became central to many African agricultural economies. Europe's greatest impact on the continent prior to about 1800 came through the Atlantic slave trade, which began in the early sixteenth century and reached its height in the seventeenth and eighteenth. Initially it was dominated by the Portuguese, but later they were edged out by the Dutch, the Danes, the French, and the British, who transported millions of Africans – the precise figure is a matter of contention – to the Americas.

Yet these were no unilateral impositions; they were, rather, complex and multi-faceted interactions, involving mutual borrowing and adaptation. The influence of ancient (pre-Christian) Egyptian – and, by extension, upper Nile valley – culture and civilization on the Hellenistic world is undeniable, for example, despite European attempts to sever Egypt from the rest of Africa through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Later, the Islam that came to Africa was adapted to local needs and conditions, and the global faith would be greatly enriched through its Africanization; and Europe itself – in ways which we perhaps do not yet fully appreciate – would be fundamentally changed by its relationship with Africa, in economic, cultural, and perhaps political terms, during the era of the Atlantic slave trade. At the same time, moreover, by placing too much emphasis on the supposed "external," we not only run the risk of oversimplifying processes of historical interaction, but we also risk losing sight of the key notion of *internal dynamics*. And these internal dynamics include the force of "people power"; processes of social formation; economic ingenuity and innovation; cultural and political creativity; the playing out of revolution – and, indeed, the reverse of the same coin, the establishment and broader acceptance of a given status quo. Kings are "bad," sometimes, and sometimes internal structures do not work; at other times "external" things are "good," and are adopted. This is true throughout history, and of all peoples and cultures; above

all, of course, change is ongoing, and experiental. It is also important to remember, even as we seek to identify the ways in which Africa has been objectified by the outside world, that history itself objectifies: the very discipline of the study of the past is an exercise in objectification. We need to keep this in mind when at times we rely on historical studies which have themselves been dependent upon "objectifying" European sources, especially for the nineteenth century.

Above all, emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a cogent timeframe for close examination, and one which encompassed clear lines of continuity as well as dramatic change. In many respects, the nineteenth century constituted something of a "golden age" of African political, economic, and cultural creativity; but it was also an extremely violent era, as "golden ages" often are, and the violence itself was routinely misunderstood at the time, and has continued to be since. Colonialism, again – enormously significant though its impact was in certain key respects – was in many ways absorbed into *African* patterns of change, while the postcolonial era has borne witness to the resurgence of unfinished business, much of it dating to the pre-1900 age. All this, meanwhile, must be understood against the backdrop of a global economy several centuries in the making and increasingly inimical to Africa's own development. It is critical to stress the importance of Africa's *longue durée*, as otherwise particular patches of the continent's history – not least the most recent past, often viewed in curiously ahistorical isolation – simply will not make sense, and are certainly vulnerable to misapprehension.

A Brief History of the Study of Africa

African history as an academic discipline is relatively young. As recently as the early 1960s an Oxford scholar could famously dismiss the continent's past as "the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes";[1] but even as he did so, new approaches to the study of African history were being developed. What we mean here, of course, is the application of an intellectual "modernity" to Africa; needless to say, Africans have long understood the histories of their own societies on their own terms. Since the middle of the twentieth century, however, European historical methodology in the Greco-Roman tradition has been utilized, for better or for worse, in the attempt to reconstruct the African past. In the 1950s and 1960s, professional historians and social scientists in a range of other disciplines, many of them based at African universities – Ibadan in Nigeria, the University of Ghana, Dar es Salaam in Tanzania – began to treat African history as a field for serious study; and it is no coincidence that this took place when most of Africa itself was gaining independence from European colonial rule. With newly rediscovered sovereignty came new interest in Africa's deeper past: history, indeed, was seen as an essential part of the nation-building process. The past, of course, has long been used – or, more commonly, abused – by politicians, guerrillas, statesmen, and would-be builders of nations of every hue, and in Africa, as elsewhere, these would become less enthusiastic and more cynical about history as time went on. But the "nationalist history" of the 1960s launched a vigorous new academic discipline which continues to challenge racist, Eurocentric

assumptions about the world and to reconstruct and interpret the historical journeys of the myriad of peoples and communities that make up the vast region we know today as "Africa."

Historians of Africa have made use of a range of sources. The identification of usable sources was particularly important for the pre-colonial past, as few societies – with the exception of the Arabic north and the Ethiopian highlands – left behind written records. Archeology was used to chart material and cultural change over the longer term, while linguistic change and spread could also be employed in discerning social, economic, and political metamorphosis. Historians have also had to make use of the written sources of foreigners, beginning with those of the Arabic-speaking travelers and traders from the Middle Ages onward, and after the sixteenth century those of European missionaries, traders, and explorers; in the twentieth century, extensive use of a vast array of colonial records has supported new avenues of historical research. Yet scholars have also been able to utilize the recorded indigenous oral histories and traditions which are the heart of all communities, and the testimonies which have been recorded in the course of the twentieth century. Clearly, each of these types of source has its limitations as well as its contribution to make. Studies of archeology and language generally permit the historian to glimpse only very approximate timescales, and only very broad patterns of change; the written words of foreigners are riddled with the cultural and social prejudices and misunderstandings characteristic of outsiders, though some are more problematic and insensitive than others. Indigenous oral histories themselves were prone to change and distortion over time, and as a general rule favoured the authors' particular lineage as well as reflecting current political circumstances. Nonetheless, used with caution, these sources have proved invaluable, and their utilization in the 1950s and 1960s reflected a new respect for (and indeed empathy with) Africa's past.

Why had there been no attempt to reconstruct Africa's past systematically before this time? The answer, hopefully, can be found at various junctures in the course of this book. But suffice to say here that by the beginning of the twentieth century, by which time most of the continent had been brought under European colonial rule, there existed a firm belief that Africa did not *have* a history. This "truth" persisted through much of the colonial period: Africans were perceived as "primitive," "savage," and lacking in political, cultural, and technological sophistication. Europeans in this period possessed a deeply rooted belief in the superiority of their own civilization, and vast swathes of the non-European world, Africa included, were regarded as "inferior" on numerous levels. Concepts of inferiority were vital in that they justified colonial rule itself; and thus Africans were depicted as lacking history, a benighted people without a past, and with no future either, unless "rescued" by Europe from the fate assigned them by biology. Moreover, most African societies, outside the Islamic zone and the Ethiopian highlands, were non-literate, and Europeans argued that a people without writing, without documentation, could not possibly have a history. Africa's "history," according to this view, began only when Europe introduced literacy to African elites – for most, only after the 1880s and 1890s. As for literate Muslims and Abyssinians (Ethiopians), these were slightly higher up the scale of civilization, but not much: their barbarity was inherent, their written languages merely expressions of semi-civilization.

Not only were these ideas worked into the narratives of colonial power, but they also shaped Europe's perceptions of Africa's pre-colonial past. Where evidence did exist of "civilization" – the state of Great Zimbabwe north of the Limpopo, for example, or the monarchical states of eastern and northeastern Africa – Europeans decided either that Africans were not ultimately responsible for it, or that the particular peoples involved were not actually *African* in any case. External, usually lighter-skinned, influences must have created such cultures: thus were the marvellous stone buildings of Great Zimbabwe the handiwork of a mysterious, vanishing white race, and "Ethiopians" possessed of Caucasian ancestry. In South Africa, racist presumptions of this kind had profound political consequences: twentieth-century *apartheid*, notably, rested in part on the conviction that white settlers had discovered an "empty land" in the seventeenth century, a land given to them by God, and inhabited by a few "blacks" who were in any case not too far above animals in the grand scheme of things. These ideas were influential through much of the twentieth century, and during that time Africa was represented largely through European cultural prisms. One of the key challenges for students of modern African history is to consider in what ways – if at all – this has changed in our own era.

It is not easy to ascertain exactly where these perceptions originated – their roots lie deep in Europe's own historical development – but there can be little doubt that the growth of the Atlantic slave trade was accompanied by the rise of European racism toward Africa. Between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, Africans came to be seen as "natural" slaves, the products of undeveloped societies and cultures, and "blackness" thus became associated in the "Western" mind with servitude and savagery. We will deal with some of these issues in greater detail in the early part of the book, but it is worth noting here that in the course of the eighteenth century there emerged in Europe a public debate around the slave trade, a debate which would have a profound influence on perceptions of Africa and which in some ways continues to resonate today. One group was opposed to the slave trade, the abolitionists, and another defended it, the apologists, but they shared certain basic assumptions about African society itself. The apologists argued that because Africa was a savage and backward place, a kind of "living hell," the slave trade was a form of blessed release, taking Africans from their cursed environments and landing them in the Americas, a new beginning. Moreover, they argued, Africa produced slaves in any case, through endemic warfare; there was nothing to be done to stop this. The abolitionist position was that because Africa was a savage and backward place, it was in need of European intervention which would introduce to it what became known as the "three Cs" – Christianity, Commerce and Civilization. The slave trade caused violence and suffering; Africans must be saved, from slave traders as well as from themselves. The two groups had in common a belief in African backwardness, their differences a matter of interpretation. It was the abolitionist position which prevailed, in terms of both tangible outcome – the slave trade was indeed "abolished," Denmark and Britain leading the way – and ethos, in that their view of Africa prevailed through the nineteenth century. By the end of the century, the argument held sway that only through European rule would Africa ever develop – economically, politically, and culturally. Africans were children who could only be

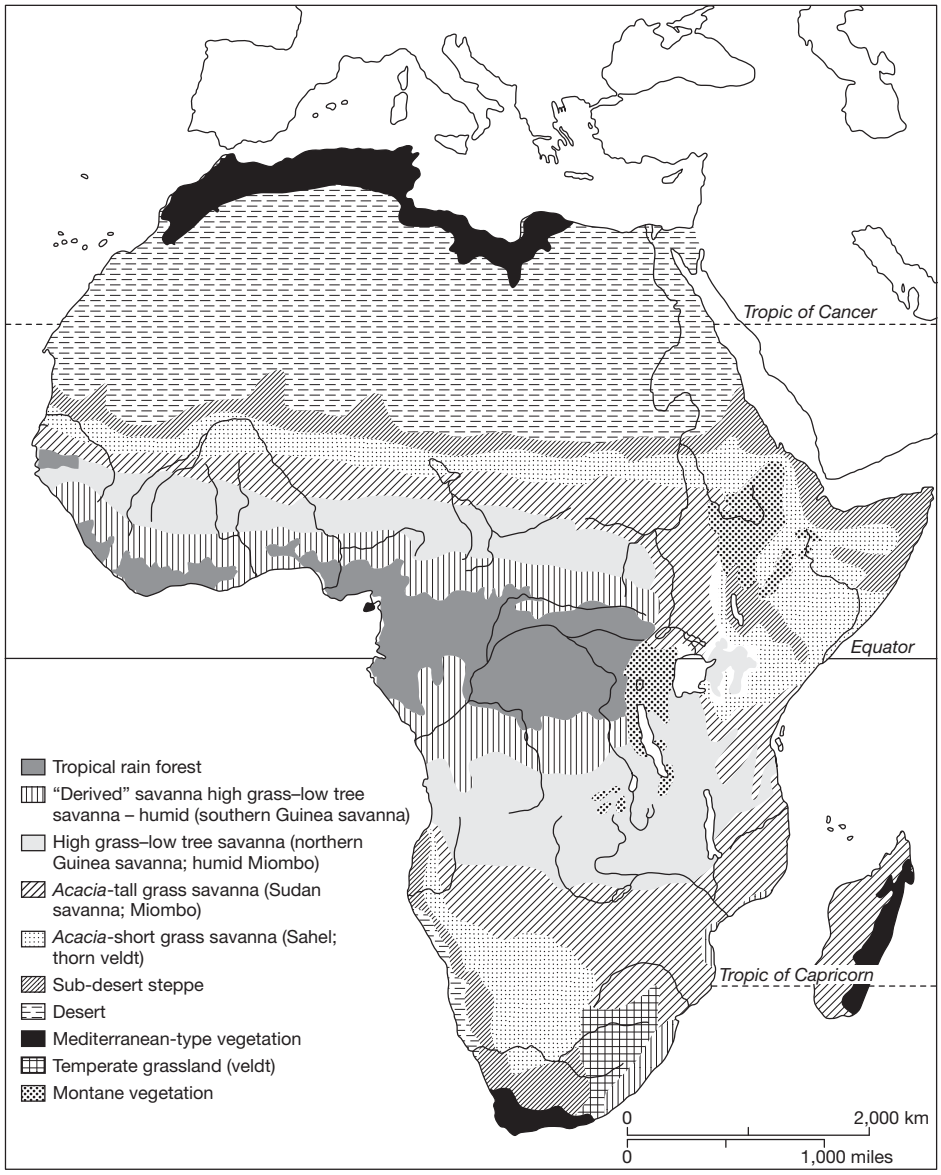
helped by European parental guidance. This, at least, would become the public justification behind colonial rule.

It was an ethos, as we have observed, that would only be seriously challenged in the middle decades of the twentieth century, during the twilight of colonialism and the dawn of African independence. The struggle for the present – the achievement of national sovereignty, stability, prosperity – also became the struggle for the past, as Africans and a new generation of Western scholars sought to overturn an array of cultural and historical distortions. The struggle continues, despite the inevitable sloughs of cynicism and the occasional blind alley. At the present time, when Africa apparently staggers from one crisis to the next along its post-colonial path, and people in the "developed" world seek "solutions" in much the same way as their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors did, the deeper history of the continent has never been more relevant. Unfortunately, "presentism" is dominant: despite some doubtless honorable intentions, Africa is too often treated ahistorically by policy-makers and humanitarians, who frequently ignore, or have little interest in, the full force of Africa's history. Nonetheless, in an era of civil conflict, famine and drought, economic underdevelopment and mismanagement, corruption and political oppression, the search for Africa's way forward must begin in its past.

Land

Africa is the second largest continent in the world, and encompasses enormous diversity in terms of geography and climate from the Mediterranean to the Cape of Good Hope. Clearly, this natural diversity cannot be separated from the history of the continent's inhabitants: environment and human history are indelibly intertwined, and nowhere is this more demonstrable than in Africa, where disease and poor, thin soils have obstructed the growth of human settlement in many regions. The history of Africans is in large part the struggle to adapt to hostile environments. Arguably the single most important disease in African history, for example, has been trypanosomiasis, or "sleeping sickness," spread by the tsetse fly and prevalent in forested and woodland areas. Its influence was particularly keenly felt in societies which relied heavily on animals, for example those employing horses and cattle across the Sudanic belt. Outbreaks of sleeping sickness, which often occurred when bush or vegetation encroached on formerly cleared areas, were attacks on society itself, while the prevalence of the tsetse fly in forested areas was a major influence on state-formation: horses, for example, could not be used in this environment. It is important to consider these disease dynamics in understanding social and economic change.

Physically, Africa has a strikingly regular coastline, with relatively few natural harbours in the form of deep bays and peninsulas; along other stretches of coast, maritime activity is inhibited by sand-bars. This has meant that Africans have not had the same opportunity as Europeans and Asians for maritime travel or exploration; with the exception of the coastal Mediterranean peoples, Africans have had frequent and intense contact with other continents only in comparatively recent times. This is not to suggest, again, that African society did not absorb external influences when these presented



Main vegetation zones of Africa. From M. Crowder (ed.), *Cambridge History of Africa.* Vol. 8: *c.1940–c.1975* (Cambridge, 1984), p.194, Map 5; © 1984 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.

themselves, but rather that until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, African development was relatively self-contained; combined with difficult terrain and a low level of transport technology, this meant that African civilization was in some important respects essentially insular in development and outlook.

We can divide the continent's physical geography into eight approximate zones. First, we have the northern coastal lands of the Mediterranean: similar in climate to southern

Physical Africa. From J. Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (Cambridge, 1995), p.2, Map 1. © 1995 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission from Cambridge University Press.

Europe, though usually warmer and drier, this zone is a coastal belt, varying in width, encompassing the northwestern part of the continent – the "Maghreb" (literally "the west" in Arabic) – where the belt is at its widest and covers the northern parts of modern Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Mediterranean and Atlantic winds across the Atlas Mountains in Morocco and Algeria generate moisture, and the area is noted for the fertility of its soil.

South of the Mediterranean coastal belt, the Sahara desert, the largest in the world, constitutes our second region. In the prehistoric era the region appears to have had adequate rainfall and may have supported a substantial population; but for reasons which are not yet entirely clear – possibly because of a tilt in the earth's axis some 12,000 years ago – this vast area began to dry up (a process known as "desiccation") and for many centuries has been uninhabited outside the oases which are scattered across it. However, the great desert should not simply be seen as an obstacle, severing contact between northern and sub-Saharan Africa, an assumption which is often made. Trans-Saharan communication was difficult, but oases (and camels) played a critical role in facilitating long-distance caravan routes, routes which have existed since antiquity, permitting contact between the peoples of the Maghreb and those of sub-Saharan western Africa. Nor is this zone completely lacking in arable land: as in the Atlas region, the mountains of the Hoggar, Tibesti, and Air generate enough moisture to facilitate agriculture.

Our next zone, adjacent to the Sahara, is the Nile valley. The river Nile is central to understanding the physicality of northeastern Africa. It is formed from two distinct rivers – the Blue Nile rising in the Ethiopian highlands, the White Nile issuing from Lake Victoria in East Africa – which meet at modern Khartoum, from whence the great river winds its way through the desert to the Mediterranean. Annual rains in the Ethiopian highlands and in interlacustrine East Africa cause the Nile to overflow, and as the river subsides, a rich, fertile mud is deposited which has been carried from the upland slopes. Thus, a narrow strip exists on either side of the Nile which contains some of the richest cultivable land in the world: it can support dense populations and has given rise to some of the oldest and most complex civilizations in the world, while also providing a link between Africans north and south of the Sahara.

Next, south of the Sahara in the west, desert gradually gives way to vegetation made possible by the warm equatorial winds which blow from the Atlantic. The "sudanic belt" is savannah, stretching across the continent. The term "sudan" was applied to this region by the Arabs of northern Africa and basically means "land of the blacks"; they also applied the word "sahel," meaning "shore," to the zone where the desert gives way to savannah. In other words, the desert was like a sea, and the beginning of the vegetation zone was its coast. The belt of increasing vegetation between the Sahara and the lush coastal forests is broken by a series of rivers which have had an enormous influence on the human history of the region. The Niger rises in the Futa Jallon range of Upper Guinea and loops north virtually into the Sahara before turning south into modern Nigeria where it links up with the Benue, another great river which rises in the mountains of Cameroon. The river then flows into the Atlantic through a maze of creeks and smaller rivers, the Niger delta. As with the Nile, rains in the Futa Jallon mountains cause the Niger to overflow its banks on its northward path; the resulting fertility means that the central Niger valley can support a relatively dense population and has been the scene of some of West Africa's most ancient and powerful kingdoms. The Senegal plays a similar role further west. To the east, Lake Chad, fed by rivers rising in Cameroon, also provides opportunities for agriculture and modifies the southern Saharan climate. Our next region, the west-central rainforest, lies to the south of the vast savannah region: this covers most of the West African coast, with the exception

of the "Benin gap," stretching inland to varying distances, and ultimately links up with the great forests of the central African basin to form one of the world's largest tropical forests.

The highlands of Ethiopia, our sixth region, is covered largely by volcanic material which breaks down to give a rich, deep soil; it is this soil which is carried north by the Nile and forms the basis of Egypt's fertility. Rain falls abundantly and the cool uplands provide a favorable climate. The fertile highland area is a natural center of civilization; between it and the sea is the plain of Somalia, connected to Djibouti and coastal Eritrea, which is dry and torrid and incapable of sustaining a large settled population, instead being home predominantly to nomadic herdsmen.

Further south, the seventh zone, we have the vast plateau of east-central Africa which has its highest point in the Ruwenzori Mountains which form a kind of "spine" in the center of the continent. To the west of these mountains is the great Congo river system and rainforest, noted above, but to the south this gives way to savannah and the Shaba plateau where the river Zambezi rises. To the east of the Ruwenzoris lies the Great Lakes region of East Africa, the main ones being Victoria, Tanganyika, and Malawi, though there are many others. Much of the plateau land of east and central Africa is hot and dry, covered by tree scrub and difficult to cultivate, but there are important exceptions. The cool and fertile Kenyan highlands contain excellent farming country; the slopes of Kilimanjaro on the Kenyan–Tanzanian border and the Shire highlands in modern Malawi have similar advantages; and the region between Lakes Victoria, Kyoga, and Kivu – modern Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi – has abundant rainfall; and the resulting fertility has facilitated political sophistication.

Finally, in southern Africa, the vast plateau continues, separated from the ocean by a coastal strip. Southern Africa is also dry, open savannah country, covered by grass, bush or thorn scrub; the winter months (June–August) can be cold. The region is free from malaria and the tsetse fly which plague society further north. It is ideal for cattle-keeping, but cannot in general support densely populated agricultural societies; a partial exception to this can be found in the southeast, in the area around modern KwaZulu Natal.

People

This diversity of environment facilitated the emergence of distinct languages and cultures. Physical distinctions, too, evolved according to particular environments, which placed different demands on human societies in terms of survival and reproduction, and reflected processes of adaptation to those environments and climates, and responses to different patterns of nutrition. Thus, for example, there were the Khoisan in southern Africa, Afro-Mediterranean groups in the north, and Negroid peoples across the forests of western, central and eastern Africa. Such physical distinctions were often erroneously referred to in terms of "race" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; further, Europeans (and in some areas, at the local level, Africans themselves) often used physical types to denote the degrees of "backwardness" of a given people, or the level

of "civilization" they had achieved, whether in economic, political or cultural terms. "Lighter-skinned" peoples, for example, were often held by Europeans to have brought more sophisticated technologies and political systems to a given area. In fact, physical difference – for example in skin pigmentation – has nothing to do with "race." Biologically, there is only one human race, and groups sharing particular gene pools are properly referred to as "populations."

Physical diversification was attended by linguistic multiplicity, and research in this area in recent decades has revealed that continental Africa can be divided into four distinct language families, a family being defined as a group of closely related dialects developing from a common ancestor known as the "proto-language." One of the largest families is known as Afro-Asiatic, encompassing much of the northern half of the continent as well as western Asia. Afro-Asiatic comprises many of the languages of Ethiopia, Eritrea, and the surrounding area, Berber in north Africa, and Hausa in the west; it also includes Hebrew and, rather more relevantly for Africa in recent centuries, Arabic. The Niger–Congo family, with its root in West Africa, embraces much of the southern half of the continent; one of the most important single offshoots is Bantu, and Bantu languages are now spoken across much of tropical Africa. Nilo-Saharan languages are scattered across the Sahara, and some are spoken by other Negroid populations outside the Niger–Congo family, but they are mainly concentrated in the zone between Lake Chad and the Nile. Finally, Khoisan, perhaps the oldest of all the continent's language groupings, is associated with the pastoralists and nomadic hunter-gatherers of southern Africa, notably in the area of the Kalahari. Its distinctive "click" sound, however, is also heard in small pockets in Kenya and Tanzania. In very general terms, Afro-Asiatic, Niger–Congo, and Nilo-Saharan are associated with the spread of settled agriculture, albeit often combined with the keeping of livestock; and the growth and increasing dominance of these languages over a long period of time – millennia in some areas – may reflect improved access to food, relative population growth, and thus the marginalization of Khoisan speakers.

Africa's story over the past two millennia is essentially that of population migration, integration, and subdivision. In northern Africa, for example, Arab migration – out of the Arabian peninsula, into Egypt, and over subsequent centuries across the Maghreb and into the Nile valley – had begun soon after the rise of Islam itself in the seventh century. In the Maghreb, the process of "Arabization" is associated with the migration of Arab pastoral nomads, the Bedouin, between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. Those following the coast were known as the Banu Hilal, while those pushing inland were the Banu Sulaym. Their movement was attended by some degree of destruction and dislocation of extant agricultural communities; but they also carried with them Arabic language and culture, as well as Islam, and they gradually absorbed Berber communities. This period, indeed, saw the transformation of North Africa into part of the Arabic-speaking world. Arabs crept slowly up the Nile valley, too; in particular, Islamization across the region was boosted by the southward migration of Arab pastoral nomad clans in the fourteenth century. Thereafter Arabs moved into the central African interior, across Darfur and toward Lake Chad; but the process, while it brought Islam into these areas, was also characterized by intermarriage and social and cultural integration, and

formerly mobile Arab communities became increasingly sedentary and "Africanized." In this way older communities mutated, and new societies and cultures were formed.

Similar processes can be identified in sub-Saharan Africa, and are especially associated with the gradual migration of the Bantu-speakers from the area of the modern Nigeria–Cameroon border into eastern, central, and eventually southern Africa. Prior to the Bantu expansion, these regions were occupied largely by Khoisan speakers or speakers of languages related to Khoisan; as we have noted these are still in evidence at the southern end of the continent. Over a long period of time, the peoples of the eastern Sudanic belt (for example the region of the upper Nile) diverged from those to the west in terms of economic systems: while eastern Sudanic peoples became nomadic and/or pastoralist, western African peoples became predominantly agricultural, developing sedentary lifestyles, although there were exceptions, notably the Fulani, many of whom remained nomadic and interacted with northern African groups. Agricultural West Africans developed larger and denser populations than in pastoral or nomadic regions, and the expansion of the Bantu was in part related to improving agricultural techniques and iron-working technology. The expansion seems to have begun around or shortly after 3000 BC, by which time settled agriculture had reached the Bantu homeland, and it lasted for the next three millennia or more. Some groups, known as "North Bantu," began to move eastward along the fringes of the great equatorial forest, from Cameroon toward the Great Lakes; among these communities there then developed proto-East Bantu and proto-West Bantu. The West Bantu moved south into the central Congo basin by the middle of the first millennium BC, and into the woodlands of Angola, while others broke off eastward toward Lake Tanganyika and the Zambezi; the East Bantu, by about 800 BC, had reached lacustrine Africa, and Bantu-speakers were entering southern-central Africa – the area of present-day Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe – in the early centuries AD. Current thinking suggests that this was *not* a "mass" migration, but was rather piecemeal and localized, achieved by a multitude of shuffling advances stretched over many centuries. But the net result was that Bantu-speakers colonized swathes of sub-Saharan Africa and can in many ways be considered the true pioneers of this vast region, opening it up to settled agriculture. It was a continent-wide population movement which involved complex interaction and exchange between migrating peoples and indigenous populations; above all, settled populations and food-producing communities laid the foundations for regionally distinct societies and cultures, leading in turn to larger populations and spurring further technological advances. The Bantu also contributed their manpower to the populations of the central and northern Americas as a result of the Atlantic slave trade, in which they were both protagonists and victims.

Complex material civilization, according to a standard historical view, is largely dependent upon urbanization, economic specialization, and social stratification, all of which require relatively dense populations; as we have noted, these were often lacking across the continent. There was, however, considerable diversity in respect of political structure and availability and use of forms of technology; there were important technological differences between Africa north and south of the Sahara, for example. Northern Africa, as well as the Ethiopian Highlands, was technologically relatively

advanced in so far that use was made of the plough, which increased the area of land under cultivation; south of the Sahara, however, the hoe was the main implement of cultivation, which only allows for a relatively small area of land to be cultivated at any given time. The hoe, of course, was fit for purpose: in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the thin soils were not suited to plough cultivation, which tends to destroy weak soils and brings about soil erosion, and so the hoe was entirely appropriate to the ecological systems in which it was employed. It remains true that the hoe did not facilitate the volume of production which the plough did further north; but colonial officials, for example, frequently misunderstood the skill involved in its use, for sub-Saharan African farmers produced a wide variety of crops, both for subsistence and for commerce. Another major difference between the regions either side of the Sahara was in terms of transport, for while north Africans used the wheel, this was entirely absent in sub-Saharan Africa; in large part its use was prohibited by difficult terrain, and by the lack of pack animals to pull wheeled transport in tsetse-infected areas. Compared to other parts of the world, therefore, technological and commercial development took a particular form, and opportunities in these spheres were limited in some areas. Camels and horses could be employed in desert and savannah; but in woodland and forest, the bulk of transportation was on the head, which meant that heavier items of low value were scarcely worth carrying, and that the most important items of long-distance trade were small and high-value, such as gold and ivory; slaves, of course, are self-transporting.

Lower productivity was also related to demography. As we have noted, Africa had a markedly low population density and large parts of it were underpopulated; thus, unlike in western Europe or southern Asia, for example, the scarce resource was not land but labor and the control of people rather than land was the key to the growth of large, centralized social structures, and the means by which wealth and power might be acquired. African agricultural systems were often rotational in nature, and agriculture was extensive rather than intensive. With population growth inhibited, cultures and ideologies were developed around the core concept of fertility, and social structures, underpinned by such ideologies, were built around polygamy and slavery. Both involved the control of production and reproduction. Children themselves meant labor and the continuity of the community; the concept of kinship, whether real or invented, was critical, and in its absence, coercion was essential. In general, there were relatively few "landless people" compelled to work for low pay for an elite which owned great tracts of land, a phenomenon which would only appear during the colonial era with the displacement of entire populations to make way for white settlement, for example. Placed in this context, of course, the export of people via long-distance slave trades – whether across the Atlantic, the Sahara, or the Red Sea and Indian Ocean – was particularly destructive.

Finally, Africans built societies and political structures of staggering diversity and complexity across the continent. Europeans tended to categorize African political units as "tribes," a profoundly problematic term dealt with in later chapters; suffice to say here that it only has validity or utility in particular contexts, and is largely a twentieth-century construct. In reality, African societies ranged from the nomadic to the centralized and territorial, from the transhumant pastoralist to the sedentary agricultural. Much African

society was organized roughly around the idea of the clan, involving the concepts of kinship and genealogical descent; sometimes, again, these were imagined rather than actual. But it is dangerous to generalize, and many states and societies were formed around allegiance to outstanding individual leaders, or groups with particular political, technological or spiritual talents, unconnected with kinship. Many were territorial, with sovereignty resting on spatial definition; sometimes even this was portable, however, especially in land-rich regions. The period of colonial rule altered to some extent the capacity of Africans to effect change, in different ways and at different times; but change, again, in the nineteenth as in the twentieth century, was continuous, and continues apace in the twenty-first.

Note

1 Hugh Trevor-Roper, quoted in A. G. Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (Harlow, 1973), p.32.

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