David Henige

Rich in the Wisdom of Hindsight


When colonial rule still prevailed, if barely, attempts to plumb the African past were typically regarded, at best, as means to administrative ends and, at worst, as interesting stories. Missionaries and administrators collected oral data for utilitarian purposes, caring little whether they were true so long as they were serviceable. African informants responded in kind, tailoring their testimonies to the requirements of the particular occasion as they sensed them.

The next stage—coincident with, and immediately following, the end of colonial rule—ushered in quite different views, espoused by different sets of participants. African nationalists and professional historians now determined the conduct of research in the field and, as a result of their disparate but convergent aims, oral sources came front and center in a well-defined academic enterprise. The new governments invited researchers to come and discover historical places in the sun. Since great swaths of the African past were available only through oral traditions, collecting such sources became virtually a full-time enterprise in the 1960s and early 1970s. So did believing them. The zenith of this movement was encapsulated in a special issue of the *Journal of African History*—the journal of record for the emerging field—which published several precise precolonial chronologies, derived almost entirely from oral tradition, with scarcely a lacuna, or a doubt, to be found anywhere.¹ At the time, it must have seemed as if all that remained was to tidy matters up by collecting more traditions and attaching

them to the existing schemata. At the end of this process, the history of African societies would lie exposed.

Before this hope could reach fruition, however, the tide once again turned. Studies in the psychology of fieldwork practices, the application of a broader comparative framework, and a greater diversity of practitioners brought a regression toward the mean. Only seldom thereafter would either of the previous extremes be explicitly defended, although neither has faded away entirely, or probably ever will. The use of oral sources began to be applied less to histories of the more remote (pre-1850) past and more to studies of the effects of colonial rule on African societies and vice versa. Furthermore, the transient hegemony of various theoretical standpoints during this period boded ill for such sources, since their thrust would have been to modify and individualize historiographical enterprises that could not tolerate such effects.

In the 1990s, the influence of cultural studies helped to return the individual—or, at least a humanized collectivity—to center stage. Writing about individuals who were not warlords, traditional rulers, or other public figures had hardly been in vogue during the 1960s and 1970s. The goal then had been to establish historical sequences and fill them with the kind of plausible details that could aggregate into a group narrative history, similar to long-standing histories of, say, the Anglo-Saxons, the Tang dynasty, or the Israelites. At different levels of analysis, the African past was to be seen, by turns, as unique and typical.

The interesting aspect of this progression from indifference to belief to doubt to disbelief is not that it was unprecedented, or even unusual, but that it has been entirely compressed into a single extended scholarly generation. That there are living, practicing exponents not only of, but from, every stage is hardly surprising, since so many exemplars of the pattern that eked out their metamorphoses over centuries now exist. Should any future frontiers of historiography remain, their cyclical treatment will probably unfold even more rapidly, perhaps even skip a stage or two.

_African Voices, African Words_ comprises an introduction and thirteen studies divided into three parts. The first set of essays, “Giving Africa a History,” by Bethwell Ogot, Megan Vaughan, Isabel Hofmeyr, Ebiegberi J. Alagoa, and Abdullahi A. Ibrahim, focuses on historical and historiographical issues.
The second group of essays, “African Lives,” includes four essays that treat “life history,” a concept that has come to be almost synonymous with the “below stairs” or “subaltern” approach to studying the past. As the editors point out, “[i]n the 1990s, life history had become an unproblematic and much practiced mode of historical scholarship” (2). Some might think that claiming to understand the past through understanding the lives of individuals who had little or no impact beyond their immediate surroundings tends to push both the definition and connotation of history beyond practical boundaries. The authors make little attempt to discuss this problem, so engrossed are they in their own passages through the field, generally cast in apologetic tones that make for tedious and unrewarding reading. Each author defines or redefines “life history” differently and inconclusively. Of more interest are their collective *mea culpas* about their initial naïvete in trying to come to terms with gathering biographical materials that could somehow be made representative of a larger historical experience.²

Two of the four essays in the final section, “African Imaginations,” consider the role of popular media in defining and selling truth in Tanzania and Ghana. In these chapters, as in others, no comparative experience is brought to bear, although the editors claim that the contributors “took their respective studies to be in direct conversation with scholarship on fields other than African” (19).

Taken as a whole, if not by individual chapter, *African Words, African Voices* is a fair measure of how the African past has been studied during the past fifty years. Historians, thinking like historians, are likely to find three of the essays of particular interest, although not necessarily for the same reasons.

The first comes from the first section and, even though it is one of the shortest in the book, it is also one of the most interesting, and the most unnerving. In it, Alagoa, a prolific historian of the Nembe, his own ethnic group in Nigeria, discusses his attempts to produce a history of a neighboring group, with whom he has maternal ancestral connections, but to whom he was also an “outsider,” despite working sporadically among them for nearly

² For other views on the fieldwork experience, see Carolyn K. Adenaike and Jan Vansina (eds.), *In Pursuit of History: Fieldwork in Africa* (Portsmouth, N.H., 1996); Peter Metcalf, *They Lie, We Lie: Getting on with Anthropology* (London 2002).
Alagoa frankly portrays his problems in collecting the raw materials and in publishing the results. Many of his informants and local sponsors objected to his including accounts of the past that were not locally sanctioned. He was also criticized for what he did not choose to record or publish. His critics were many and influential, and he felt obliged to submit his findings to public scrutiny before trying to publish them.

Alagoa begins by posing questions: “In what ways and to what extent did the community desire to influence the scholar’s account, and was it able to do so? How can the scholar remain faithful to professional canons of objectivity?” (93). In seeking public approval of his enterprise, Alagoa found nearly every one of his findings disputed by one interest group or another at one point or another. In the end, “[i]n a crunch, the consensus of those assembled [to vet his work] carried the day” and “all statements that the complainants considered derogatory or insulting were removed” (100, 97)—apparently, a large number. After much delay, Alagoa’s research was published, but he concedes that “the ‘approved’ authoritative text [of the work] remains a contested text within the Okpoama community” (101).

This account is convincing in its specificity, although not remarkable in the abstract. Oddly, however, none of this flux and reflux—the conditions that materially affected the content of the work—finds mention in the work itself. Alagoa thanked a number of “informants” and then proceeded to offer a fairly unencumbered—and superficially uncontested—history of Okpoama. The indicative mood prevails, with no suggestion that many of the data presented are in dispute. Those who read Alagoa’s book, but not this later and less visible article about his fieldwork, will come away with the feeling that they have been exposed to a straightforward and uncomplicated rehearsing of the Okpoama past, not at all unlike much of the African local history that has been composed during the last forty years or so. By Alagoa’s own testimony, however, little, if any, of his published Okpoama history can be read à la lettre, even though it is presented in unproblematical terms and speaks of the importance of “community support” throughout. In fact, Alagoa’s ambivalence is evident even in the essay; he refers to

4 Ibid., ii.
his work as having the “backing and participation of the commu-
nity,” even while demonstrating that it had too little of one and
too much of the other (92).

Alagoa’s published work—his book, not his essay—is not un-
typical of the compromises that need to be made in any such
work, whether they be aimed at funding agencies, referees, pub-
lishers, or, as in this case, a targeted audience. It also raises the
question of who can best write the living history of a given group
of people—the insider, who knows much, maybe too much,
and cannot risk offending his friends and neighbors; the quasi-
outsider, such as Alagoa, who also cannot risk offense but who
might lack the requisite knowledge and experience; or the true
outsider, the academic, who has less to lose by being honest but
who might never be able to gain a serious foothold in the local
epistemology?

The second essay of special interest is White’s, which closes the
volume. She wastes no time is coming to the point. Her opening
paragraph reads, “This essay is about reliability, accuracy, and what
is true and what is false and when and where those distinctions
might be best deployed. I am not concerned with how Africans
understand these concepts but with how historians understand
them. This is an article . . . about evidence (281).”

These sentiments seem out of touch with several other con-
tributions, which treat truth as too elusive, or too plural, to merit
extended effort, and who do not use the word evidence at all. For
White, the pursuit is not without its cul-de-sacs. She focuses on
her interviews about the wazimamoto, the alleged bloodsucking
government officials of the late colonial and early independence
period. Since no evidence for the wazimamoto is known to exist
outside the popular imagination, White treats them as fairytale
characters—as too implausible to be true. Yet, many of her infor-
mants did not share her notion of plausibility—“no one doubted
these stories [just] because they seemed unlikely” (284). In fact, “if
someone told someone who told someone who told her husband
that wazimamoto were in the area that night, then they were
(290)”.

5 White’s examples are drawn from her larger study, Speaking With Vampires: Rumor and
History in Colonial Africa (Berkeley, 2000).
In this instance, as in many others, interpretations clustered around the plausible/im plausible divide, the boundaries of which are osmotic. Plausibility is predicated entirely on individual and shared experience. Although this standard might have been supplemented later by less subjective notions, the initial will to believe in wazimamoto clearly derived from individualized rationale or “gut reaction.”

White’s experiences prompted her to ask a rhetorical question (295): “How then do I write a history of things that never happened?” Phrased in that way, the answer is that such histories happen all the time. Phrased as “How do I write a history of things that I know (or am reasonably sure) never to have happened,” the question raises worthwhile issues. White offers at least a partial answer to the question herself, observing that oral history was designed, perhaps inadvertently, to be a fail-safe mechanism; historians can always turn to “study[ing] the silences and omissions” whenever they lack hard data (297).

Although not claiming any kind of conversion for himself, Alagoa’s account happens to speak for a number of African historians—Cohen and Ogot included—whose views on plumbing the past have changed remarkably within the last thirty years. These historians began their careers by taking oral traditions at their word to construct detailed accounts of the precolonial African past for which no other evidence was available, though they seldom preserved or published the testimonies themselves.

In sharp contrast with his early work, Ogot begins his essay in this volume with a series of questions about “the use and importance of oral traditions in African studies”: “Are they reliable? Are they valid? Can we use them for dating? Are they relevant to the contemporary situations in Africa or are they merely of antiquarian interest?” His answer is, “Such questions . . . do not deal with the real issues we should seriously debate. We need studies which . . . [can provide] fit explanation for contemporary situations” (31). Ogot is critical of colonial anthropologists for posing as authorities on Luo history at the expense of the Luo themselves, and for imposing the scholarly ideologies of the time on whatever data they collected. He also laments that his earlier work overlooked the reality that oral data “are synthetic products of communal and individual historical composition which change constantly over
time [and which] could not therefore be compared to documentary evidence” (46). He approvingly quotes Liyong to the effect that “[t]o live, our traditions have to be topical; to be topical they must be used as part and parcel of our contemporary contentions and controversies” (44).\(^6\)

Even though other contributors are less frank than Ogot, each of them, refreshingly if not surprisingly, plies a line of historical thinking that is much different from that expressed in their earlier work. What is surprising, however, is that given their treatment of “life history” as a microcosm, and their view of all evidence as ultimately idiosyncratic, the contributors make no systematic attempt to address their own life experiences as possible causes and effects of their work in general. If Ogot or Cohen or any of the other historians who have trod the same road—or, for that matter, a different road—had written specifically about his/her peregrinations, the nearly polar philosophical and practical shift mentioned earlier in this review essay would have taken on more substance. Have these historians been leaders in this odyssey, or followers? Why have they chosen their particular paths? Why are they pursuing different ones now?

As is often true in this genre, several chapters suffer from a disconcerting lack of context; the authors tend to define context narrowly in terms of the relationship between themselves and their informants. Cohen’s discussion of a single piece of testimony surrounding the investigation into the murder—or assassination—of the Kenyan foreign minister Robert Ouko in 1990 epitomizes this endemic defect. Cohen’s concern is with the testimony of the victim’s housekeeper who claimed to see “a white car” in the vicinity at the presumed time of the crime. Cohen gnaws away at this nugget with dogged determination, turning and twisting it in the glint of various lights. Such exegesis is certainly acceptable procedure, but Cohen is never able to turn exegesis into explanation. He provides no information about either the antecedents of the crime or its denouement—other than to imply that the case apparently has never been officially declared solved. Was it an assassination—as was commonly held at the time and since—or simply another manifestation of the widespread societal violence in Kenya? What

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was Ouko’s relationship with the Kenya government? How was the investigation carried out? What was the perception of it in Kenya and elsewhere? Cohen raises none of these questions, or any others that might naturally arise from the discussion. The “white car” is subjected to the most thorough of autopsies, while being studiously disembodied from every scintilla of context. The star is there but the sky is missing.

Historians disagreeing with their old positions can be even more instructive than historians disagreeing with one another. Yet, understanding the past is a dynamic process—the constant reconsideration and recycling of methods and perspectives, coupled with agile redirection as required. Every generation views itself as an interpretive culmination, completely justified in doubting events once believed unquestioningly to have occurred, or at least the reports about them.

For 2,000 years, the Trojan War was an actual event. Homer, as the preserver of a tradition, and Dares Phrygius and Dictys Cretensis, as actual participants, were considered its reliable observers. For centuries, however, the Iliad has been treated primarily as literature, with a little coincidental history on the side. The accounts of Dares and Dictys were exposed as hoaxes long ago. Those who persist in regarding the Homeric accounts as history have been relegated to the margins, partly by the evidence (or lack thereof) and partly by preference. There are countless Trojan Wars on the scrap heap of historiographical progress, and there will always be room for more.

Generation after generation has cleared away its particular notion of historical undergrowth. Who knows what will happen a thousand years hence? Will more evidence of our past emerge, or less? Will the vast bulk of evidence that remains subliminal or subterranean yield to new forms of technology? Asking these questions at least encourages the requisite contextual thinking, and sometimes questions are just as important as answers.

Without, apparently, using this approach as a conscious model, the contributors to African Voices, African Words make a good, if too-often implicit, case for it. This essay discusses only a few of the issues embedded in the volume. Others will find their own points with which to match wits. That the arguments are dis-
parate is not necessarily a disadvantage, as it is in many collected essays; the opposite can also be true. In this case, the disparateness reflects not only the contingencies of what happened in the past but also, no less important, the contingencies entailed in exploring that past.