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Writing African History by John Edward Philips

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## ~REVIEW~

**John Edward Philips (ed.), *Writing African History* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005) vii + 532pp, Index, \$90.00 Cloth.**

### **Reviewer:**

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This book is a compendium of essays on various aspects of theories and methods in African history. It has twenty chapters divided into four sections. There are very few anthologies on the problems of sources and methodology in African historiography. When we talk of problems, we mean the numerous challenges, which a historian is confronted with whenever he or she engages historical inquiry and production of knowledge.

Arguably, this book is to date the most multidisciplinary volume on African historiography. All the authors adopt diverse tools and methodologies specific to their disciplines in exploring various aspects of history of African people, their culture and society. The editor adds value to the content of the essays with a brilliant introduction and conclusion, which explore the meaning of history and historical research. In the concluding chapter, he provides a step -to -step approach to the following closely related task: choosing a topic, data collection, data evaluation, data organization and writing.

Authors of the various chapters in section two look at the significance of data in the reconstruction of the African past. While some of these genres of data such as colonial and missionary documents are “conventional” sources, linguistic, botanical and archeological data are genres, which can best be used multidisciplinary. The role of archeology, linguistics and anthropology in the development of African historiography cannot be over-emphasized. These disciplines provide the needed materials for cross-examining the data from other success, more importantly, oral sources. It is through archeology and linguistics that we have the opportunity of knowing that Africa is the birth- place of humans. Archeological remains have also

been helpful in examining the history of inter-group relations, which oral traditions and of course written sources cannot validate. It is pertinent to note that the limitations of archeological and linguistics evidences, which is predominantly based on its inability to give specific dates events took place, is one of the many challenging historians face when using non-written sources.

Oral traditions like archeological sources have their own limitations. In this connection, the authors of the two chapters on oral traditions look at the merits and limitations of this class of data. The main merit of oral tradition is its ability to tell the past of most African societies where the culture of preservation and transmission of historical experiences in written forms did not exist until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Folklores, epigrammatic sayings, poems, moonlight stories, legends and proverbs to mention but a few are types of Africans oral narratives are repositories of histories and cultures of African people. The oral transmission of the past of pre-literate African societies from one generation to another helps to preserve Africa's past experience with a substantial degree of accuracy.

What is more, some societies in sub Saharan Africa have specific institutions and chiefs who were responsibility for preserving the history of their communities. Some of these chieftaincy titles are hereditary. This implies that history can be "conveniently" transmitted from one generation to another with limited chances of generational discontinuities. The major limitations of oral traditions as previously mentioned is the inability to tell the exact date events took place. In another vein oral traditions are capable of consciously or unconsciously distorted and manipulated. Nevertheless, all sources of history have their own limitations and have to be analysed within the framework of the circumstances under which they are produced. Methodological limitations of oral traditions should there for be considered as one of the numerous problems of sources that a historian have to grapple with.

The chapters on European sources, mission and colonial documents and Arabic sources help to understand the role of external contact in the preservation of African past. The authors discuss the historical circumstances behind the production of these documents, and their merits and limitations for writing African history. A fact that remains indisputable is that while these sources have proved useful for writing African history, the producers did not document African history for the purpose of creating African-centered interpretation of the past. Missionary accounts for instance were

meant to create correspondence between the missionaries in Africa and their home country. The same applies to colonial archival materials, which were meant to document day-to-day activities of the imperialist and not how Africans reacted or responded to Alien rule.

The chapters in the third sections provide insight into the craft of history writing. The authors of these chapters explore various aspects of African history and the challenges of historical reconstruction. The chapters on women and social history are written against the background of the inadequate scholarly attention given to this aspect of African history until the 1980s (p. 290). The authors of these chapters were quick to add that the major factor responsible for inadequate scholarship in women, economic and social history is the circumstances responsible for the development of African historiography. From what follows, African historiography developed as a result of the need to explore the political histories of African past and to demonstrate to the colonialist that Africa, prior to the colonial encroachment had long and enduring history of state formation and empire building. The “undue” emphasis placed on political history by pioneering Africanist scholars paved the way for a sort of neglect of economic, social and women’s history. The author of the chapter on memory posit that: “Memory reveals a solution to the difficulties of the historian in the sense that it offers a raw material for the rewriting of history after achieving a better understanding of the experience of the participants themselves.” The chapter on visual culture examines the profundity of this data for historical research while the one on the last.

This book will certainly stand the test of time. The contributors are experts the in their respective fields. They combine their training as professional historians and archivists with personal experience in producing scholarly writings on African history and historiography.