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# G. Mokhtar, ed. *UNESCO General History of Africa*

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**NINE THOUSAND YEARS OF AFRICAN HISTORY**

G. Mokhtar, ed. *UNESCO General History of Africa*, vol. II *Ancient Civilisations of Africa*. London: Heinemann, 1981

This is part of an eight volume series on General History of Africa, sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, (UNESCO). The series is the outcome of intensive research and discussion by experts in various disciplines in African studies from different parts of Africa. The UNESCO General African History series pays tribute to the determination of African experts in history and related disciplines to put the history of Africa in its proper perspective and for it to assume its rightful place in world histories.

This volume constitutes a major document in African History. It is important for the study of African civilisation and of the history of world civilisation. It covers a tremendously profound period of African History; nine thousand years, from the end of the Neolithic era to the beginning of the seventh century of the Christian era. It is a period which remains largely obscure except in respect of certain relatively privileged regions such as the Nile valley and North Africa. In spite of this limitation the book provides a great window on the history of ancient African civilisation. It provides understanding of the main trends in African History, the nature of societies and the changes that took place as well as fundamental contacts between the continent and the rest of the world. It discusses serious and sensitive issues and questions in African History and African Historiography. These include the validity of oral traditions as historical source material for writing African History, the Hamitic hypothesis, Africa as a cultural and historical reality, issues of isolation, homogeneity and diversity of Africa.

The work dismisses the general sense of invalidity that surrounds use of African oral traditions as historical source material for African History. It claims that Iliad and Odyssey are comparable sources, and that if the latter are accepted as valid sources of history of ancient Greece, then oral accounts in Africa should similarly be accepted. This is a scholarly argument with serious merits. The book clearly invalidates the perspective that ancient Africa was not a historical reality because of isolation and separation of the various parts from one another. The author contests the idea of the great divide between White Africa in the north and Black Africa in the south. The Sahara Desert is presented as a bridge for inter-connections and interrelationships rather than as a divide that supported isolation of various points. The Sahara supported inter-flow and exchanges in almost all directions. Four identifiable trade routes linking north Africa to west Africa predate the beginning of Christian era and the introduction of the camel.

Nubia is cited as another major crossroad and point of intersection for civilisations of Western and Central Africa on one hand and the Mediterranean Near East and Asia on the other, promoting the diffusion of cultures via exchanges, borrowings, adaptations and rejections. The Hamitic hypothesis is discussed in a schol-

arly and critical manner. The book asserts that the major weaknesses of the Hamitic hypothesis lay in its obsession with origins of people and ideas, and its failure to recognize and appreciate the role of internal factors in African History. It stresses that rather than present the Africans as dormant actors and ineffective participants in their own historical development, as does the Hamitic hypothesis, the whole of cultural development should be seen as one process and experience. The external factor should be admitted as part of the total dynamics that underlie historical development. The process of diffusion, exchanges and borrowings, adaptations, adoptions and rejections as already noted constitute major dimensions of cultural growth and development. The East African sub-region demonstrates how the external factor can cause development of cultural similarities among peoples of different communities. Circumcision traceable to Kushite influence is cited as a common practice in East Africa. This similarity exists in spite of the variations in socio-political systems manifested in the region. This is a balanced interpretation that enriches African History and Historiography. Further this argument reduces the polarity between the Hamitic-hypothesis and non-Hamitic schools of thought.

There is an emphasis on the relationship between environment, local resources and growth of cultures and civilisations. Egypt and the Nile are used as critical examples of positive exploitation and utilization of local resources for the advancement of people and their society. The work unfortunately does not discuss other areas of Africa at the same level and with similar intensity. Discussion of areas around significant rivers and river valleys - Niger, Congo, Zambezi - would have provided the opportunity for comparison and contrast, and insight into such questions as why did such high civilisation occur in Egypt and not around the Niger and its Delta, the Congo and the Zambezi. Also it would have helped to throw light on the debate of the origins of ancient Egyptians and their relationship with the people in sub-Saharan Africa.

Out of twenty-nine chapters of the book, twenty were devoted to Egypt, the Nile valley and North Africa (Maghreb), and nine chapters to the rest of Africa. Debate on Egypt and its civilisation is a worthwhile and well-deserved scholarly engagement. But it should not be made to subsume discussions on the rest of Africa in a major work that covers the entire continent. Perhaps the sections on Egypt, the Nile valley, Nubia, Axum and north Africa should constitute one volume and the other nine chapters constitute another volume which may be titled a "Survey of Ancient Civilisations of Sub-Saharan Africa." The survey is used because of the fragmentary nature and inadequacy of archaeological data so far on these parts.

The work apparently marginalizes most of Africa. The lack of a comparable volume of data on the other parts may explain this deficiency. Archaeology forms the major source material for this work. Archaeology is a significant source material for writing of ancient history, but it has serious limitations for writing a history of a region, especially one as large and diverse as Africa. Archaeological excavations are not uniformly spread over the continent. As the editor noted, the lack of adequate archaeological information cannot be supplemented by other sources and reports of foreign travellers, contemporaries of the events and the facts

of the period under consideration. Oral traditions are either non-existent or not valid for this ancient period. Archaeology as a historical tool is by far more important for the historical of communities in non-tropical and arid regions where climatic and possibly soil conditions favor retention of artifacts and other material culture. Therefore the tropical areas of Africa are less likely to have archaeological information even if excavations are to be equally undertaken in all regions of Africa.

A chronological approach is applied throughout the work. A combination of the chronological with the thematic approach would have made the work more interesting and less difficult especially for classroom use. Themes such as political organisation, trade, inter-group relations, religion in the Neolithic period or iron-age would enhance understanding and make comparisons and contrasts easier.

The term "Africa" is used in this work in a geographical, continental sense or perspective. Consequently in this work, Africa includes all the various racial categories: the Semitic, Hamitic, dark-skinned (Negroid) sub-Saharan, the Indo-African stock of Malagasy and the Khoisan of South Africa. This diversity of race, ethnicity and culture invalidates the myth that Africa is homogenous culturally and that it is synonymous with the sub-Saharan dark-skinned peoples. The discourse on Malagasy also underlines the fact that Africa has had connections and contacts other than those with the Mediterranean.

The elaborate discussion on Egypt has serious merits especially as far as details of the various opinions on origins of ancient Egyptians are concerned. The Egyptian scholars in this debate do not seem to accept that ancient Egyptians were the same as the dark-skinned sub-Saharans, in spite of cultural similarities. In this section the work notes that cultural similarity does not necessarily imply common origin or same racial identity. Ancient Egyptians of the lower Nile and its Delta are likely to have blended the stocks of peoples that inhabited the region from Libya to Near East and southward towards Nubia. This is a deduction based on the dynamics of geographical location, and on the fact that Egypt was a corridor for movement of people in many directions in the region.

The judgments in this volume remain inconclusive and tentative. This is largely due to the obscurity of the period, scarcity of sources in general and of solidly dated sources. With that reservation, it is significant as a general reference for ancient African civilisations. It provides plausible scholarly insights into some sensitive issues in African History. It is particularly valuable for the study of Egypt and especially of the debate on the origins of the early Egyptians and their Pharaohs.

Adeline Apena