



4-1-2001

Kevin Shillington. *History of Africa*

Laurence Grambow Wolf

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>

Recommended Citation

Wolf, Laurence Grambow (2001) "Kevin Shillington. *History of Africa*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*.
Vol. 44 : No. 44 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol44/iss44/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Kevin Shillington.

History of Africa.

Rev. ed.: St Martin's Press, 1995.

This is a comprehensive introduction to African history for an audience of nonprofessionals, sharing this field with the much shorter *A Short History of Africa* by R. Oliver and J.D. Fage (Penguin, 1988, first edition 1962) and Basil Davidson's *Africa in History* (Collier, 1974, first edition 1962). These also appeal to the nonspecialist, although Shillington claims uniqueness in this respect. His book is better mapped and illustrated than the other two, more up to date, and more comprehensively descriptive. One can feel inundated with unfamiliar names and places at some points, but that is the nature of historical works which are descriptive rather than analytical and theoretical. There are almost 90 maps, if I have counted correctly, all pertinent and well-designed. There is also a plentiful supply of photographs of sites and personalities.

Shillington has organized the material into 29 chapters. The first two cover prehistory and are followed by eight which get the reader up to the 1600s. Then come nine covering the 1700s and 1800s, followed by five on the era of European domination, and five on World War II, independence and subsequent events. The chapters are more regional than topical in focus: North and Northeast Africa to 1000 AD, or Southern Africa to the 18th century, for instance.

Afrocentrists will, I suspect, not welcome this book. Shillington acknowledges humanity's African origins, but considers the early folks were probably brown (not the *de rigueur* black); that ironworking was probably introduced via the Maghrib (rather than diffusing from black Meroe); considers Napata and Meroe to have been civilized from Egypt (rather than the other way around); and does not insist that the ancient Egyptians were all dark Africoids. Indeed, he hardly ever refers to race at all, omitting the point dear to Afrocentrists that Egypt and North Africa, by deliberation or habit have been considered

Caucasoid. It should be obvious that these populations will be darker than most Europeans, but it does not follow that because they were Africa-born, they must have been as Africoid as Ghanaians or Congolese. He also does not trace all civilizations in Africa to Egyptian origins, another Afrocentrist *idee fixe*. And then, of course, Shillington is an Irish-born scholar educated in Ireland and England, which makes him *persona-non-grata* among Afrocentrists, although it must be noted that some of his academic experience was at African universities.

This is a well-written work and a good introduction to Africa both for the nonprofessional and for a newly interested academic. Unicausal explanations are eschewed. The author attends to important environmental factors which I am always pleased to note as the historians I first read more than half a century ago knew nothing of the environment.

There is a startlingly simple geographical progression among the Sudanic “empires”, from Takrur on the Atlantic coast to Bornu’h near Lake Chad. Apparently this is in some way consequent to shifts in transsaharan trade routes, but nowhere is it explicitly explained by Davidson, Oliver and Eager or by Shillington. Were the Afrocentrist hypothesis correct about the seminal role of ancient Egypt (Kemet), one would have expected this succession of civilizations to have proceeded from east to west instead of from west to east, as it actually did.

The states which developed at various times and places in Africa are variously referred to as “kingdoms” or “empires,” with no rationale given to explain these terms. How is an African kingdom distinguished from an empire? Is this merely a matter of arbitrary tradition?

My critical remarks should not serve to detract potential readers from *History of Africa*. If one is in need of an up-to-date, comprehensive, descriptive introduction to the history of this really still little known continent, use Shillington’s book as a jumping-off point. His ample bibliography can lead you on if you so wish, quite well.

LAURENCE GRAMBOW WOLF