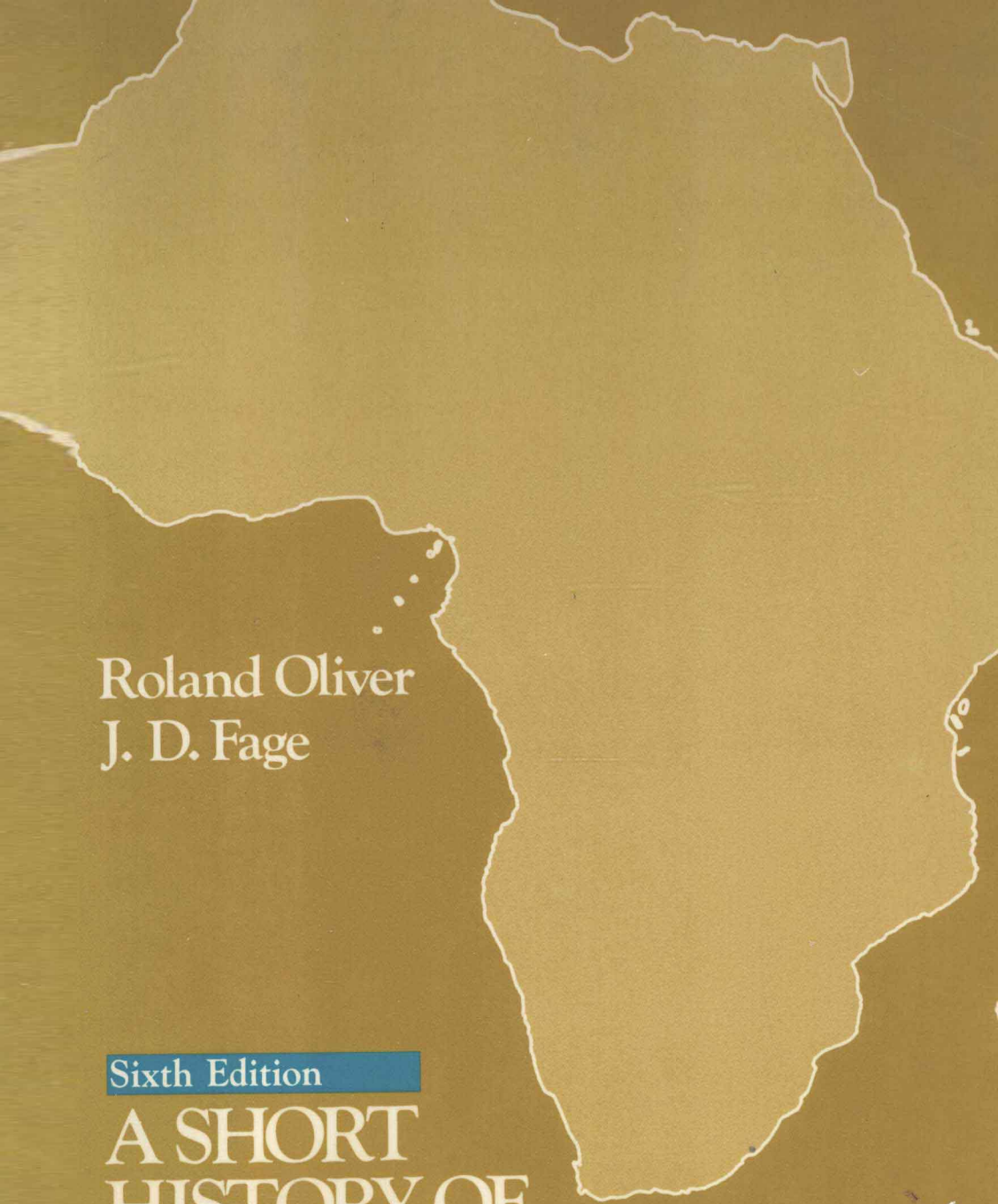

Roland Oliver
J. D. Fage

Sixth Edition

A SHORT HISTORY OF AFRICA

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Roland Oliver
and
J.D. Fage

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A Short History of Africa

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A SHORT HISTORY OF AFRICA

The first edition of this book was written in 1961. At that time the academic study of African history was less than fifteen years old. There were four named posts in the subject in Britain, of which we held two. The first learned journal devoted to the publication of the results of new research in African history had been founded in the previous year with ourselves as the editors. At the handful of universities then existing in Africa, teachers of general history, nearly all of whom were non-Africans, were pioneering degree courses in which African history was beginning to be a major component. What we hoped to achieve in this small book was to give some unity and shape to the history of a continent which had until very recently been studied mainly in bits and pieces, as parts of this or that European empire or sphere of missionary or commercial influence. Africa in 1961 was experiencing the full tide of decolonization, and it was clear that the first need of newly independent countries was to learn much more about their African neighbours. Outsiders too had to learn to think of the continent as a whole.

Since 1961 there has been a great advance in knowledge of the African past. And a quarter of a century rich in momentous events has been added to its span. Four times already we have revised our work in the light of the new literature and attempted to summarize the most recent events. This time the publishers generously offered to re-set as much of the text as we thought it necessary to re-write. We have therefore been more radical. Chapter 20 has been largely reconstructed, and Chapter 21 is entirely new. Chapter 8 has been considerably rewritten. Chapter 4, already much changed since the original version, has been still further revised. Throughout the text we have tried to correct what was wrong. What we have tried *not* to

do is to change significantly the proportions. Largely as a result of the political situation in different parts of Africa, the progress of knowledge has been very uneven. To have taken full account of the research salients would have made havoc of our battle-line. We believe that the strength of the book has been in its general design, and we have tried to keep it so.

R.O.
J.D.F.

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1 The Hunters

The first popular idea about Africa is also the first major misconception. The notion of Africa as the Dark Continent is a parochial European idea, which gained currency because Africa was the last of the continents to be opened to the gaze of the outside world, and because it was the last to experience that full impact of European people, ideas and techniques which was so marked a feature of world history from the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries. At the beginning of this modern period of history, however, Africa was far from the most backward of the continents. The Australians, for example, when they were discovered by the Europeans, were still living as hunters and gatherers, and were using stone tools comparable with those of the Upper Palaeolithic cultures abandoned by most European and African peoples from six to nine thousand years before. Again, the more advanced of the sixteenth-century American Indians were neolithic or 'New Stone Age' cultivators, using polished stone tools. A very few of them were just beginning to learn the use of metals. But many more were still Mesolithic hunter-gatherers. The Africans of the same period, on the other hand, with few exceptions, were farmers equipped with tools of iron – and there were in consequence many more of them. Throughout the northern third of the continent most of them belonged to the urbanized civilization of Islam. Even in the southern two-thirds of the continent, most of the African peoples were organized into states and communities powerful enough to deter invaders and migrants from overseas until late in the nineteenth century. True, much of Africa was unhealthy and inaccessible, but not more so than Panama or Peru. The real reason why the Europeans did not go inland and seize the gold mines of western and south-eastern Africa, for example, was that the Africans there

were already well enough organized to exploit these resources themselves and to keep the overland trade in their own hands. It was in large measure the progress already made by the Africans in earlier centuries that enabled them to resist the modern age for so long.

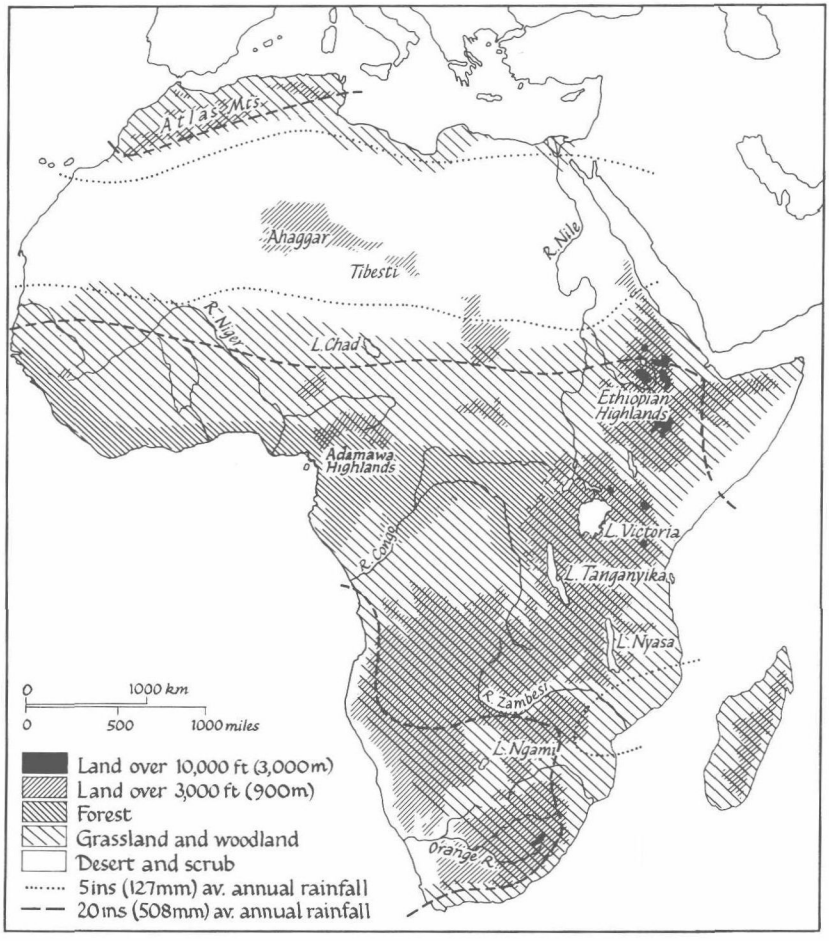
In historical times, therefore, the backwardness of Africa was always a backwardness relative only to the mainstream of human development in the more favoured parts of Europe and Asia. In *pre*-historic times – at least through all the long millennia of the palaeolithic or 'Old Stone Age' – Africa was not even relatively backward: it was in the lead.

Archaeologists today are increasingly confident that it was in Africa, and more specifically in eastern equatorial Africa, that man's ancestors became differentiated from other primates. Equatorial Africa is still the home of mankind's closest relatives, the gorilla and the chimpanzee. The fossilized remains of man's more immediate hominid ancestors, the so-called Australopithecines, have so far been found only in or near the highland savannas of eastern and southern Africa, in contexts dating from around 4 to 5 million years ago. The currently accepted distinction between man and other hominids is that man made and used stone tools. Judged by this test, the earliest men were, once again, East Africans, the earliest dated examples occurring around 2·5 million years ago. By about 1·5 million years ago the human species had attained the stage known scientifically as *Homo erectus*, with a cranial capacity about two-thirds that of modern man. It was probably only at this period that human populations spread northwards into Saharan and North African latitudes, and so across the isthmus of Suez into Asia.

The earliest stone tools, known as Oldowan after the famous sites at Olduvai Gorge in northern Tanzania where they were first excavated in large numbers by Louis and Mary Leakey, were made from rounded cobbles or pebbles, which were split and then chipped around the edges so as to give a cutting edge. Some of the chippings were further worked into sharp flakes for piercing skin and sinew, and into smaller tools for scraping. Essentially, it was a butchering outfit, one that marked man's progress from a vegetarian to a meat-eating diet, and from a way of life spent mainly in gathering roots, fruits and nuts to one increasingly dominated by hunting. Most of the sites containing tools of this description have been found in the

highlands of eastern and southern Africa. Those few which have been found further afield, in Israel and Morocco, appear to belong to a considerably later period. Though some early men of the *Homo erectus* type are known to have lived in Indonesia and China, and to have used chopping tools faintly reminiscent of the Oldowan, their date is likely to have been well within the period of man's first expansion from the African cradleland.

Around 1·4 million years ago, the earliest human tools began to be superseded, in the East African heartland, by a radically new tool-kit known as the Acheulian, which was destined to spread all over the



1 Africa: principal geographical features and vegetation

western half of the Old World. Its most characteristic item was the mysterious pear-shaped stone implement, misleadingly called a 'hand-axe'. No one knows exactly what it was used for. Certainly it was not an axe. Professor Desmond Clark, after much practical experiment, has described it as an all-purpose skinning-tool and meat chopper. At all events, it was the most standard and the most characteristic of man's artefacts for more than three-quarters of a million years. It has been found all the way from India to Spain and from England to the Cape of Good Hope: of the parts of the globe inhabited at this period, only the Far East and Central Asia escaped its influence. The successive techniques employed for making the hand-axe have been named, in accordance with the perversity of archaeologists, after the two French villages of Chelles and St Acheul, where the 'type-sites' were established. But Europe was not the centre of these industries. The Chellean-Acheulian sequence is consistent in Europe, Asia and Africa, and there is little doubt that the centre of its development was in Africa. Far more hand-axes have been found in Africa than anywhere else, and the East African dates are by far the earliest. Two of the richest hand-axe sites in the world are at Olorgesaile, forty miles south of Nairobi, and at Olduvai Gorge, just across the Tanzania frontier from Olorgesaile. Only in East Africa, and at one site in Morocco, is it possible to observe the evolution of pebble tools and hand-axes as a single continuous process.

Throughout the million years or so during which men in the western part of the Old World were making Acheulian tools, they were themselves evolving from the 'erect' towards the 'sapient' stage. Here again there is little doubt that man in Africa was in the lead. It was not only that in Africa man had had a longer history. The carrying capacity for wild game of the human cradleland in eastern and southern Africa was about ten times as great as the most favourable environments found elsewhere, and this fact alone would account for a greater density of human population and therefore a more rapid evolutionary process. While the skeletal record of the earliest sapient forms is thin, there is no doubt that both of the more recent stages – *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* and *Homo sapiens sapiens* – were reached much earlier in Africa than in Europe, by more than 100,000 years ago in both cases.

By this time, if not before, man had learned to control fire, and he was tending to abandon his former open-air camps for the comparative comfort and stability of caves and rock-shelters. These were but two symptoms of a much greater power of adaptation to different environments which was manifested also in the evolution of tools. Here, the changes which occurred at this period mark the transition from the lower to the middle palaeolithic. Everywhere the old Acheulian hand-axe and the rather indeterminate smaller tools that had accompanied it, gave way to one or other of a series of new tool-kits, each adapted to a particular range of environment. These kits were not exclusive: there was a great deal of overlap between one set and another. But in Africa it is possible to distinguish three broad, regional traditions. The first, comprising all of Africa north of the Sahara, is called, like its northern Mediterranean counterpart, Mousterian. The second was a heavier, woodland tool-kit, designed more for grubbing and grinding than for hunting. It is usually called the Sangoan, and it belongs to the woodland regions surrounding the equatorial forest, from southern West Africa to the Congo-Zambezi watershed. The third was an open-country tool-kit, the Fauresmith, used from northern East Africa to the Cape of Good Hope.

During most of the middle palaeolithic the characteristic tools from all these regional traditions consisted of stone flakes of various shapes and sizes, first struck from a large core and then retouched by chipping around the edges so as to produce tools appropriate for different purposes, such as the killing, skinning, chopping and scraping of meat, bone, skin and sinew, the grubbing and grinding of roots, and the working of wood and other materials. Much later on, towards the end of the middle palaeolithic, came the appearance of blades, produced by striking off slice after slice from a carefully prepared core. These marked a great advance in the efficiency of cutting tools, such as chisels and gouges, knives and razors. And this in turn led, round about 30,000 years ago, to the stage of material culture called upper palaeolithic, of which the most important characteristic was that most of the stone artefacts were microliths, that is to say, they were the small, sharp components of composite tools made of stone and wood and various kinds of ligatures. At this stage, tool-kits became even more closely adapted to particular environments,

but the three broad traditions of the middle palaeolithic can still be detected. The Mousterian tradition had developed into the Aterian, the Sangoan into the Lupemban and the Fauresmith into the Stillbay. In all of them the increasing range and complexity of tools was accompanied by a decline in stone-shaping techniques, but with the new utilitarianism came an inventiveness which greatly enriched the scope of man's material and imaginative life. With the bone needle came the beginning of the tailor's art. With string there came the possibility of the bow: Aterian arrow-heads were perhaps the first to be used anywhere in the world. Again, it was in upper palaeolithic times that men and women used the first cosmetics, the tell-tale stains of red ochre witnessing to a self-consciousness and sophistication which might perhaps be equated with 'the knowledge of good and evil'.

It was during the period of territorial expansion and regional specialization represented by the Mousterian, the Sangoan and the Fauresmith traditions of material culture and their upper palaeolithic derivatives, that man's physical development in Africa, as in the rest of the inhabited world, was reaching the sapient stage. There is no need, today, to postulate any war to the death in which rival species of man were extinguished. Rather, we should visualize a long drawn-out process in which sapient characteristics spread by genetic means. However, at the same time as more fundamental differences were being eliminated, specialization towards particular environments was having its own genetic consequences in producing differences of a less fundamental kind, which can best be thought of in terms of 'race' or 'physical type'. Here, as with traditions in material culture, it always has to be remembered that there are no hard frontiers. Where races meet there are large areas of interaction, and the stereotypes merge into imperceptibility at the edges. Nevertheless, following this caveat, we can usefully distinguish four broad categories of African population which probably had their origin during the middle and upper palaeolithic. First, and most distinct from the others, there were the peoples living to the north of the Sahara and to the east of the Nile, whose nearest affiliations were with the peoples of south-western Asia – Arabia, Palestine, Syria and western Mesopotamia. Of medium height and brownish complexion, these peoples are referred to in the older literature (earlier editions of this book included) as

Caucasoid, but Afroasian is a much more accurate term. Second, there were the peoples of the sub-Saharan savanna and forest fringes, who during wet climatic phases penetrated northwards into Saharan latitudes. Tall, lightly built and dark of hue, with woolly black hair, these were the Blacks. Third, there were the peoples adapted to conditions of true forest. Short in stature and pale in complexion, these were the Pygmies. Fourth, there were the peoples of the eastern and southern savannas. Of medium height and yellowish, with hair growing in separate tufts, these were the Bushmen. Though very different from each other in outward appearance, the last three types have a very similar pattern of blood-groups, which are the most strictly genetic of all human physiological characteristics. They may therefore be thought of as three variants of a basic African stock which became divergently specialized towards different geographical environments. The Afroasians, although like the rest of mankind they were ultimately of African origin, had undergone much of their long evolution towards the sapient state outside the African mainstream: for this the existence at most periods of the Saharan desert zone is a sufficient explanation.

Nevertheless, the Afroasian peoples of Africa, despite their comparative geographical isolation, had an important role in African history as the main human link between Africa and the outside world. Obviously, this role was most significant during the exceptional periods when, for climatic reasons, the desert zone was at its narrowest, and when populations from the north and south of the desert could most easily meet and interact. Such a period did in fact occur towards the end of the upper palaeolithic, and during it the stage was set for the greatest of all economic revolutions, namely the transition from hunting and gathering to food production. This was the period when the monsoon rain-belt was shifting northwards into the African and Arabian deserts, converting them temporarily into parklands, rich in game and with streams and rivers flowing north and south from the mountain massifs of the central Sahara. Not only was it a period of unrivalled opportunity for the hunter; it also saw a great new development in one of the patterns of a hunting and gathering existence, namely fishing. Throughout the northern half of Africa, significant elements of population gathered along the river banks and by lake shores, and began to lead a kind of life that was almost

sedentary – a life based upon fishing, in which hunting and gathering had become only marginal activities.

In these exceptional circumstances the river lines and sea coasts of northern Africa took on a great significance, and they were lines which provided easy communication between the Afroasian and Black populations, by which development in the new riparian way of life could spread across the whole region. The Red Sea coast offered one avenue, the drainage system of the Nile another. The eastward-flowing tributaries of the upper Nile were separated by a narrow watershed from the rivers flowing westwards to Lake Chad, at this time a vast inland sea covering most of the central part of the modern Tchad Republic and emptying westwards into the Benue and the Niger. At the peak of the wet phase, around 7,000 B.C., the Nile was probably connected by its Sobat tributary with Lake Rudolf and the northern lakes of the East African Rift Valley. In this last region, the sites of people who lived mainly by fishing are associated with a remarkable industry of blade tools known as the Kenya Capsian. The Capsian blade, especially when made of the natural, volcanic glass called obsidian, had a cutting edge as sharp as any steel knife or chisel. It was admirable for working bone, and bone harpoons soon became one of the hallmarks of late upper palaeolithic fishing communities all the way from the Kenya Rift Valley to the tributaries of the upper Niger. Somewhere along the line, perhaps in some central area such as the upper Nile valley, there occurred the stupendous invention of pottery – certainly the earliest pottery in Africa. This 'wavy line' pottery of early African fishing communities, like their bone harpoons, was made and decorated in a nearly standard pattern throughout the drainage systems of the Niger and the Nile, thus illustrating how easily new ideas and techniques could spread among communities which in other respects had very different material cultures and ethnic origins.

Seven or eight thousand years ago, therefore, at the end of man's purely parasitic existence as a hunter and gatherer, and at the dawn of the settled life of agriculture and stock-raising, Africa was already inhabited by the ancestors of the four main racial types recognized as indigenous in historical times – Bushmen and Pygmies, Blacks and Afroasians. Of these four types, the most widespread at the end of the upper palaeolithic was probably still the Bushman, who seems to