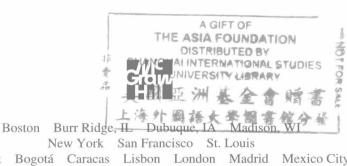


# Intellectual Traditions of Pre-Colonial Africa

#### EDITED BY

#### Constance B. Hilliard, Ph.D.

University of North Texas



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#### INTELLECTUAL TRADITIONS OF PRE-COLONIAL AFRICA

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### About the Author

Constance Hilliard received a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. from Harvard University in the areas of African History and Semitic Historiography. She has served as a visiting professor at Wellesley College and a visiting scholar at Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies. Ms. Hilliard rejoined academia after serving for several years as a foreign policy staff analyst for the United States Senate and as a columnist for the *Dallas Morning News*. The author is currently an assistant professor at the University of North Texas.



## Preface

This book was conceived several years ago in a vibrant lunch conversation with the late Professor Marilyn Waldman, whose lifelong devotion to historiography has been an inspiration to me. We talked at length about the lack of readily available English translations for Africa's rich and diverse intellectual traditions. The repercussions of this lacuna were especially unsettling, for their lack of availability left the often unarticulated but powerful impression within the scholarly community and among the public at large that the continent of Africa existed outside the main currents of human intellectual achievement.

And just as this book project evolved as a celebration and homecoming for the lost, effaced, and misplaced traditions of the African continent, its preparation has served as an intellectual homecoming for me as well. In returning to my scholarly roots in African historiography, I have delighted in reconnecting with Professors John Ralph Willis of Princeton and Martin Kilson at Harvard, both of whom have served in crucial mentoring roles for me over the years. Without their patient encouragement and support I could not have seen this project through.

It also has been my enormous good fortune to receive strong institutional support for this intellectual traditions of Africa project. I am grateful to the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) at Harvard University, its former Chair, William A. Graham, and CMES administrative assistant Mrs. Barbara Henson for making it possible for me to undertake the research for this project in my capacity as visiting scholar at the Center. I also must thank my colleagues in the History Department at the University of North Texas, in particular Professor Gustav Seligmann, for their patience, support, and enthusiasm for this project. My research assistants, Michelle Bragg and Jamie Carawan, saved me from drowning countless times in the maelstrom of details this project generated. To them I am deeply appreciative. I also must express a special note of thanks to my faculty colleagues at Wellesley College who generously offered the excellent facilities and breathtakingly beautiful setting of that campus for me to complete work on this manuscript.

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The composing of a book demands vital inputs from many people. Certainly the most critical in this undertaking has been the creative vision and enthusiasm of my editor at McGraw-Hill, Leslye Jackson. When this evolving project consisted of little more than a few sketchy ideas on paper, Leslye displayed a remarkable talent for conceptualizing it and initiating the arduous process of transforming it into an actual publication. I am deeply grateful to her for making the commitment to shape my ideas into a concrete, scholarly reality, and doing so with enormous patience and good humor. How fortunate indeed I also was to have Kimberly Hooker as project manager for this book. In working together over the course of the past several months, I have developed respect and admiration for her style of ever so gentle prodding, consummate professionalism, and an unflagging commitment to seeing this project through successfully. I also should like to express my appreciation to Fred Lentz, McGraw-Hill's book representative in Dallas. This project would never have been launched without his initial notice of my ideas and truly infectious enthusiasm for the project itself.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to the reviewers who helped shape this manuscript in many ways. My thanks go to the following people for their assistance: Roger B. Beck, Eastern Illinois University; Chouki El Hamel, Duke University; Adrienne M. Israel, Guilford College; Kenneth Mason, Santa Monica College; Cheryl Johnson-Odim, Loyola University (Chicago); David Schoenbrun, University of Georgia; Robert Shell, Princeton University; and Leonard M. Thompson, Professor Emeritus, Yale University.

My family is my most precious intellectual gift. My sister Ida Pipkin whose practical knowledge, my brother John Hilliard whose stress-busting wit, and their families provided the crucial balance demanded of my sanity during the composing of this book. And finally, I owe a debt I cannot possibly ever repay to my husband, Terrill Tripp, for being there as a one-man cheering squad for me, every day and in every possible way.

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# Introduction

here is a special beauty in perceiving the African continent as richly diverse and yet organically whole. Perhaps even more to the point, intellectual honesty impels us to do so. One of the most tragic legacies of Africa's slave past and European colonialism was the propensity of earlier Western scholars to rationalize their "civilizing mission" by devaluing Africa's intellectual inheritance and placing the continent outside the main currents of human intellectual development.

The works of such scholars employed two distinct devices—one applied to rural Africa, the other to its influential states—in order to construct African inferiority. The first device dictated a dismissal of Africa's rural intellectual heritage as "unimportant" and primitive by the mere fact of its being oral rather than written. In equating the presence of writing within a society to civilization, such scholars merely ignored Europe's own oral past. The unwritten fount for such classics as the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and others was conveniently forgotten.

The intellectual contributions of urban Africans posed an even greater challenge to maintaining the schema of African inferiority. In this instance Western scholars of a previous era performed unseemly amputations on the body of Africa itself, lopping off vital limbs and reattaching these severed appendages to more politically serviceable parts of the world. Thus, pharaonic Egypt became cartographically redefined as "Mediterranean" or merely "Near Eastern." To be sure, modern scholars now believe that Egypt may have played a far larger role in influencing the culture of ancient Greece and the Near East than previously acknowledged. However, any new appreciation of the powerful influences Egypt exerted on its ancient neighbors should serve to enrich our awareness of this African contribution to Western development rather than efface it.

Just as the sophisticated techniques of modern archaeology have situated the cultural roots of earliest Egypt in Africa among the cultures that evolved along the Nile River Valley, contemporary scholars have also found it necessary to revise once popular paradigms that depreciated the Africanness of other urban societies on that continent as well. In the same way, Western philosophers who in earlier times described early African Christians like Tertullian, Athanasius, and Augustine as merely citizens of Rome now have begun to recognize these seminal figures of early Christianity as products of an African as well as a Latinized cultural context. In other instances, historians once dismissed the rich cultural traditions of Timbuktu in the ancient empire of Songhay and the Swahili coast of East Africa as "Arab" and therefore derivative. But