



# *History of West Africa*

VOLUME ONE

Third Edition

*Edited by*

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and

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Maps by Neil Hyslop.

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# Introduction

J. F. A. AJAYI AND MICHAEL CROWDER

The aim of the editors of the two-volume *History of West Africa* is to provide a lucid, scholarly and authoritative synthesis of West African history that can serve as a basic university textbook, as a work of reference for teachers, and a general background for all those interested in West African studies. Because of the great variety of written and oral sources in many languages, the wide range of scholarly work in learned journals, as well as the wide gaps in our current knowledge of West African history, synthesis at this level is still very difficult for the individual historian to attempt. We have therefore called upon the services of scholars noted for their knowledge of particular areas and periods of West African history.

In doing this, we have not been unaware of the difficulties involved in asking over thirty scholars trained in different disciplines and writing in different places to tell different parts of a connected but often controversial story. In this first volume, apart from three introductory chapters on the lands and peoples of West Africa, the archaeology of West Africa and the process of state formation, our approach has been regional and we have varied the regions so as to encourage different perspectives on the complex story. Repetitions and apparent contradictions are inherent in such an approach. Yet, in spite of this and of the large number of authors contributing, we have been impressed, as editors, by the extent to which a coherent picture has emerged about the West African past.

In this first volume, the major emphasis has been on the theme of state formation in West Africa. We believe that the different chapters have substantially advanced our understanding of the processes involved whether in societies which had no centralised administration or in those which already had rudimentary state organisations, whether in the savannah, the forest, or on the coast. We hope that the new insights provided here in the interaction between land tenure, agriculture and other economic activities on the one hand, and state formation on the other, will stimulate further research especially in the area of social and economic history which, as far as West Africa is concerned, has tended to lag so far behind studies in its political history.

Any one who has ever planned a collaborative history on this scale will be aware of the many hazards involved. There are many problems that can be anticipated and accordingly provided for. But there are many that are unexpected. In our case, the Nigerian Civil War occasioned delays and changes of authors for both volumes, often at short notice. This has left those authors who met our original deadline in risk of being out of date even before publication in view of the amount of new material that appears every year on West African history. The death of one of our contributors, the distinguished anthropologist, Dr R. E. Bradbury, when we were already anxious to go to press, is the cause of the one major gap in this book, that on the history of the Yoruba and Edo-speaking peoples before 1500. We are hopeful that this volume will be of sufficient merit and usefulness to justify future editions and we have accordingly commissioned another author to write this chapter. We have been acutely aware of the rapid changes that have taken place in our knowledge of West African history in the little more than five years since we planned this history and invited out authors to contribute to it. The scholarly study of West African history is still in its infancy and we feel it our duty in each succeeding edition to take account of new material and new scholars so that this history can continue to be as authoritative as possible.

One basic editorial point has to be brought to the notice of our readers. We abandoned the attempt to standardise the spelling of personal and place names since there is as yet little agreement on the orthography of these names and many of our authors are firm in their adherence to their chosen orthography. We hope this will not confuse our readers, and our indexer has been assiduous in ensuring that variant spellings of a particular name or place are indexed together. We also hope that this problem of orthography will point to the urgency of establishing standard, universally accepted spellings for personal and place names in African history and geography.

Chapter XI of this volume was originally written in French and we owe the excellent translation to Dr Joan White. We owe a great debt of gratitude for valuable advice received from the many readers we consulted on different chapters, particularly from Prof. Abdullahi Smith on chapters of the Sudanic region.

Finally, this history could not have been published without the support of the University of Ibadan, in particular its Department of History and its secretarial staff; Fourah Bay College of Sierra Leone, in particular its Institute of African Studies and its secretarial staff; the University of Ife, in particular its Institute of African Studies and its secretarial staff; and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California, and its secretarial staff. To the Vice-Chancellors of the three universities and the Director of the Center, we wish to express our sincere thanks.

J. F. Ade Ajayi  
University of Ibadan

Michael Crowder  
University of Ife  
January 1971

## *Introduction to the Second Edition*

The urgency for an early revision was indicated in our introduction to vol. 1 of the *History of West Africa* first published in 1971. By that date some of the chapters were already five years old and outdated and there was the missing chapter on early Yoruba-Benin History. Four years and three reprints later, we are pleased to present this second edition.

Because of the urgency indicated, we have in this new edition retained the structure of the first edition. Professor Thurstan Shaw has completely rewritten his chapter on 'The Pre-history of West Africa.' Professor Suret-Canale, in collaboration with Dr Boubacar Barry, has extensively revised his chapter on 'The West Atlantic Coast'. Professor E. J. Alagoa has revised his chapter on 'The Niger Delta States and their Neighbours,' taking the opportunity to expand the sections on Igboland and Benin. There have also been significant revisions in Dr Nehemia Levtzion's 'States of the Western Sudan' and Dr J. O. Hunwick's 'Songhay, Borno and Hausaland'. Mr Ade Obayemi's chapter on 'The Yoruba- and Edo-speaking peoples and their Neighbours before c. 1600' has filled the gap left by the death of Dr R. E. Bradbury, and makes an important addition to the *History*.

We have been greatly encouraged by the reception given to the first edition of this work and to its companion volume, published in 1974. We are glad that the work is serving the needs of many University lecturers, students and others interested in West African history in different parts of the world. We took the opportunity of the launching of Volume Two to convene a seminar at the University of Lagos to discuss the structure and content of the first edition of the two volumes. As a result of these discussions and other consultations, we plan in future editions to revise this structure so as to take into account those peoples and regions as well as themes which have so far received inadequate attention but which can now be better appreciated as the results of new research are being made available. This will affect a number of the existing chapters. To take one example, in place of the chapter on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, we are proposing to have two new chapters, on (i) the internal trade system, and (ii) the external trade, of West Africa before c. 1800. As we promised, we hope to continue to keep this work up to date through such periodic revisions.

Finally we would like to thank Professor Robin Horton for his considerable editorial advice and assistance.

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## *Introduction to the Third Edition*

It is now almost ten years since the publication of the second edition of volume one of *History of West Africa*. We are pleased now to present this third edition which has been in preparation for several years.

This is a substantially different volume to the previous edition. As promised there are two new chapters on the external and internal trade of West Africa before c. 1800. In these chapters Professors Curtin and Lovejoy synthesise the great wealth of research that has been carried out over the last decade into patterns of West African trade. Another major development in the historiography of pre-colonial Africa has been the collection, translation, annotation and, happily, publication of written sources—mainly, though not exclusively, in Arabic. A glance through the footnotes of this volume will indicate the importance and usefulness of such collections. Finally, the extent to which our historical appreciation can benefit from a fresh look at geographical data is explained in a new opening chapter in which Professor Mabogunje and Dr Paul Richards introduce historians of West Africa to some of the techniques developed in recent years by historical geographers.

The developments in our knowledge of the economic history of West Africa, in the availability of written sources and in the use of geographical data are clearly reflected in all the new regional chapters. Dr Murray Last's chapter on 'The Early Kingdoms of the Nigerian Savanna' is a challenging look at some of the linguistic evidence for this region, and his conclusions are bound to excite considerable interest and controversy. Dr Bawuro Barkindo provides a comprehensive guide to the early history of the Central Sudan. Professor Aṣiwaju and Dr Robin Law have co-operated on their chapter covering the region from the Volta to the Niger, and a new francophone team of Jean Boulègue and Professor Suret-Canale have written the chapter on the Western Atlantic coast. Professor John Hunwick and Professor Ivor Wilks, both authors of chapters in the previous edition, have completely rewritten their chapters for this new edition. Professor Alagoa has revised his chapter on the Niger Delta and Professor Willis has added a bibliography to his original chapter.

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January 1985

## CHAPTER 1

# *Land and people—models of spatial and ecological processes in West African history*

AKIN L. MABOGUNJE AND PAUL RICHARDS

### INTRODUCTION

How have geographical factors such as climate, water resources, soils, population distribution, settlement and transport affected West African history? Over-confident but misleading answers by earlier generations of geographers to questions of this sort have discouraged historians from taking too close an interest in geographical studies. Happily, however, the days are gone when geographers would maintain that tropical regions were altogether unfavourable to the development of civilisation or that West African underdevelopment was the result of especially severe ecological constraints. Modern geographical studies are more subtle in their use of environmental data and less given to blanket generalisations.

A major factor in bringing about this change is widespread acceptance of the notion that every explanation presupposes a 'model'—a mental construct which the investigator imposes on reality in order to select and make sense of available evidence. Each model has its own intellectual history, serves to identify a specific problem, and stirs up the evidence in a particular way. When the stirring becomes routine, or when it stifles other approaches to sifting the evidence a model is ripe for replacement. It is important, therefore, to consider the intellectual history of models and the constructive possibilities of setting off model against model in order to generate more rounded perspectives of any particular problem. This is what marks off modern geographical studies from older attempts at 'objective' regional description or 'absolute' explanations of ecological and spatial processes.

We argue this point first of all in relation to maps. Choice of cartographical convention says a great deal about a scholar's assumptions concerning the situation or process described. Maps are not evidence, but *interpretations* of evidence, and when used in historical studies should be subject to as much debate and critical scrutiny as any other aspect of an author's interpretation of the available data.

The chapter then goes on to look at a variety of models of spatial and ecological organisation, and change in spatial and ecological systems, of relevance to historians of West Africa. Particular stress is laid on factors such as population growth, famine and disease. If history is to recover something of the life and struggles of ordinary people in the African past these are central not 'background' issues.

An argument that recurs throughout our chapter is that historians are already using models (including geographical models) whether consciously or not. Some of the models embedded in recent historical writing on West Africa are not so much academic theories as reflections of political and social debates from the period about which the historian writes. Spatial assumptions ingrained in recent debates about socio-economic change in West Africa (especially between proponents of 'dependency theory' and 'mode of production analysis') may derive from such sources.

The point of discussing spatial models in African history, we conclude, is not to discover a 'best' model, but to suggest alternative perspectives on established data and to draw attention to new or neglected sources of evidence.

#### MAPS AS MODELS

##### *Networks and boundaries in West African history*

The French historian and historical geographer Lucien Fèbvre, in an essay on the history of the concept 'Frontier',<sup>1</sup> notes that 'state', as a tightly-bounded, geographically all-embracing entity, is a modern conception. The European Middle Ages, he argues, did not see problems in territorial enclaves and exclaves, or feel the need to rationalise local and regional units so that they would nest together to form a contiguous national territory. The significance of political boundaries depended on the extent to which the state dominated everyday life. In medieval Europe, he suggests, this was less than in the modern world. 'The *frontière* only existed for soldiers and princes and then only in time of war ... Aristocrats, men of letters and merchants crossed it quite naturally.' The notion of national boundaries as 'a sort of ditch between nationalities that were quite distinct from one another' he traces to the French Revolution which made 'subjects, vassals and members of restricted communities into the body of citizens of one and the same state'.<sup>2</sup> Although Africanists need not accept that the modern state's geographical realisation is specifically the result of the French Revolution—it is more likely to have been part of a general trend at work as much in West Africa as in Europe in the eighteenth century—Fèbvre's argument is a useful warning not to view early states and empires from the standpoint of more recent models.

<sup>1</sup> Lucien Fèbvre, 'Frontière: the word and the concept', trans. K. Folca, in P. Burke ed. *A new kind of history: from the writings of Fèbvre*, London, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*