

Preface

History of Africa, 3rd edition by Kevin Shillington

The purpose of this History of Africa, now in its third edition, is to provide a clear, basic and well-illustrated introduction to Africa's long and fascinating past, which is easily understood by the non-specialist general reader or student and at the same time is based upon the results of some of the most recent and up-to-date research. The book pays particular attention to social, economic, political and religious developments and the way in which these affect the lives of ordinary people. At the same time, I have sought to provide a critical but chronological narrative which covers most of the major developments and societies on the continent and touches on many of the themes that have most concerned historians in recent decades.

Starting from the earliest evolution of humankind, the book traces the history of Africa through the millennia of the Stone Age to the rise and decline of the states and societies of Africa in the ancient and medieval worlds. Through the more recent centuries of increasing European intervention, the focus has remained upon the indigenous African viewpoints, developments and initiatives. Finally, I have attempted to place the post-colonial problems of political, social and economic development in their proper historical context and so avoid the strongly negative tone of so much modern writing about contemporary Africa.

A number of important changes have been made to this third edition. Some of these changes have been based upon advice received by the publishers, Palgrave Macmillan, from academics who have used, or considered using, this text as a teaching tool for students, especially in universities in North America. I am extremely grateful to those historians and teachers who took the time to offer advice on ways to improve the previous edition and who have commented upon my proposed changes to the current edition. I have borne in mind their words of wisdom and have incorporated as many of their suggestions as I have considered practicable in a work of this scope. Many of these historians expressed a desire for greater coverage of historiographical debates, the complexity of historical interpretation and the point that history is so much more than a simple narrative of events. So as not to overburden the clarity of the text of this book, which I believe has been one of its strengths, these issues have been included in this companion website which now accompanies the text, for more of which, see below.

As in previous editions, I have made small revisions and clarifications throughout the book to reflect the findings of recent research and publications. But I have also expanded or extensively revised coverage in the following areas. There is a new introduction which provides a brief overview of African historiography, from the ancient recording and passing on of historical events and personalities through to the trends and influences that have characterised or stimulated the writings of modern professional historians. This is followed by a survey of the physical geography, climate and natural vegetation of the continent. Following the environmental theme, the initial chapter on human evolution and the Stone Age has been substantially rewritten and updated, especially in the light of recent research on the likely impact of climate change over the millennia of early human prehistory. The dynastic time-chart for Ancient Egypt has

been moved to the website and there has been a substantial expansion in the treatment of Christianity in north Africa in the early centuries of the common era, thus clarifying the beliefs and significance of Donatists and Monophysites in the early Christian Church.

Oral history is reconsidered as a source of evidence for the empire of Mali. Coverage of the founding of Sierra Leone has been expanded, as has that of Somalia, throughout, from medieval to modern times in order to provide some understanding of the problems that have beset that state in recent decades. The Napoleonic occupation of Egypt now gets fuller coverage, along with its significance for the modernising state of Egypt and the study of Egyptology. There is a new section on the emergence of a nascent African 'nationalism', and even Pan-Africanism, among certain nineteenth-century west Africans in the decades before the colonial conquest. And there is expanded coverage of the First World War, including the significance for Africa of Woodrow Wilson's 'Fourteen Points', the Versailles Conference and the League of Nations.

Some of the more contemporary chapters have been reconfigured, with two additional chapters, bringing the total up to thirty-two. Within this coverage, both general themes and regional surveys have been brought right up to date, and besides expansion of the coverage on globalisation, there are new sections on international aid and the problems of aid dependence, climate change, the impact of HIV/AIDS, and the significance of China in contemporary Africa.

Perhaps the most significant innovation for this edition is the companion website, which is intended as an aid for students and teachers as well as a source of additional information and insights into historiographical debates and themes. The website contains chapter by chapter synopses, with key points to remember for each chapter and, where appropriate, cross-references to other chapters in the book which carry related themes or continuing narrative developments. Each chapter reference on the website contains essay and/or study questions, some related to illustrations and maps, as well as more extensive, partially annotated, bibliographies, to supplement those works listed at the end of the book.

The website contains digital copies of all 96 of the specially drawn historical maps that appear in the book. These will thus be available for comparative work across period and regions, and exercises have been designed to promote these possibilities. At certain strategic points in the margins of the book there are web pointers which refer the reader to further related information on the topic or to deeper discussion of historiographical developments, debates or controversies. The book thus relates the history, while the evolving companion website will not only help the student to understand and thus learn the history, but will also lead the reader through the process of historical construction. One thing that I hope any student will learn from this book and its website is that nothing in history is definitive: it is all subject to interpretation.

My debt to fellow-historians of Africa is immeasurable and ongoing – their works are referenced in the Further Reading list at the end of the book and chapter by chapter in the website. I have read widely of their work and only hope that my interpretation does some justice to their efforts.