

# Hegel's Ghost

## Sources for Early African History

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Did you know that Africa is the most linguistically diverse region in the world and contains the oldest languages? Or that at its height in the 17th century, the West African Sankore mosque in Timbuktu, Mali, was the premier center for scholarship and learning, attracting over 20,000 students from as far away as Spain?

These fascinating strands of knowledge reflect Africa's deep and rich history. Africa was the birthplace of humanity, where the first human culture developed. The African continent also gave rise to the first advanced civilization in the world, Ancient Egypt. Despite Africa's central importance in human development, we know very little about the history of the region and its people.

This generalized ignorance about Africa stems from the impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and European colonization, coupled with postcolonial socioeconomic development problems. These issues have stunted the development of large swathes of the continent, leading to the long-lasting legacy of various myths and stereotypes about the history of the region. This short essay attempts to debunk one of these myths, that Africans had no history due to the absence of writing, by discussing three significant sources that scholars use to reconstruct the African past. These sources are writing, oral tradition, and linguistic evidence.

Myth: Africa had no history

In 1837 the distinguished German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel wrote: "In the frigid and in the Torrid zone the locality of world historical peoples cannot be found."<sup>1</sup> In 1951 the acclaimed Oxford University lecturer on African Affairs and noted scholar of British administration in Africa Professor Margery Perham wrote that „Until the very recent penetration of Europeans the greater part of the continent was without the wheel, the plough or the transport-animal; almost without stone houses or clothes, except for skins; without writing and so without history.“<sup>2</sup>

One of the abiding myths regarding early African history is that there was none. Regurgitated by numerous scholars, the idea is based upon the false notion that, due to a lack of literacy, the systematic documentation of Africa's past only began after European contact. Although there were a handful of societies with writing, most communities in sub-Saharan Africa were not literate prior to European colonization in the

late 19th century. This did not mean that they were incapable of recording significant historical events for posterity. These African communities simply chose different source materials to record their past.

Before wading into these other sources, we will first discuss the traditional historical source used by a minority of African societies. Although most societies in Africa lacked writing, it is still important to highlight the few that did. These African literate societies are often overlooked or, in the case of Egypt and Ethiopia, not seen as purely African. The oldest writing system was first recorded in Ancient Egypt. Early hieroglyphic inscriptions date back to around 3200 B.C.E.<sup>3</sup> Moving further south beyond Egypt, Ancient Nubia, located in present-day Sudan, developed an alphabetic writing script by about 200 B.C.E., known as the Meroitic script. Communities that inhabited the regions that later become known as Ethiopia and Eritrea also developed a writing system, called Ge'ez, during the 2nd to 3rd century C.E.

Writing did not disappear with the decline of these early civilizations in Africa. By the 12th century, in parts of the Sahelian West African region and the East African coast, some communities were utilizing Arabic as a writing script. With the onset of the 16th century, some of these communities also began to transition to using Ajami, an African writing system that utilizes Arabic letters.<sup>4</sup> From this brief synopsis, it is clear that there were literate societies in Africa prior to European contact.

The aforementioned Timbuktu became an important market and scholarly town. At the Sankore mosque, students studied theology, traditions of Muhammad (hadith), jurisprudence, grammar, rhetoric, logic, astronomy, history, geography, science, and mathematics.<sup>5</sup> Famous written works produced in this era included the West African abdal Rahman as-Sa'di's 17th-century manuscript, *Tarikh al-Sudan* (History of the Sudan) and Mahmud Kati's *Tarikh al-fattash* (Chronicle of the Seeker of Knowledge) about the Songhai Empire. The collection of privately held manuscripts in Timbuktu eventually surpassed over 100,000, making it a significant world heritage.<sup>6</sup>

The problem with the myth that Africa had no history is that it prioritizes the dearth of writing in Africa, as evidence of lack of history, while overlooking other equally valid sources that can be used to reconstruct the past. Below the Sahara Desert, many African communities used the second important historical source, oral tradition, to record significant events in their past. According to the Africanist historian Jan Vansina, oral tradition is a verbal message transmitted from one generation to the next.<sup>7</sup> These verbal messages survive because they communicate significant events from the past to future generations. Oral messages can become prayers, epic poems, speeches, folktales, origin stories, and other narratives, like group accounts. Oral tradition was typically composed, recorded, and performed by a class or caste of bards. In West Africa, these performers were known as griots or jeliba.

Griots were associated with the court of politically centralized kingdoms. The epic poem *Sundiata*, which discusses the founding of the 13th-century West African kingdom of Mali, is one of the most well-known examples of oral tradition, as history, in Africa.<sup>8</sup> On

the East African coast, the 16th-century Kilwa Chronicle details the founding of the ancient Swahili city-state Kilwa.<sup>9</sup>

Although oral tradition has been a particularly important signpost guiding the reconstruction of Africa's early history, scholars have also utilized oral tradition to reconstruct historical narratives in other parts of the world. In England, early foundational histories such as the 1st-century C.E. Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the 8th-century Ecclesiastical History of the English People incorporated oral tradition.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, as the doyen of Kenyan history Professor Bethwell Ogot has remarked, "as historical evidence, neither oral tradition nor the written word can be an accurate and dispassionate record of the past."<sup>11</sup> As valid historical sources, both written and oral sources should be scrutinized and subjected to historical methodology and verification in equal measure.

Despite the importance of oral tradition, unless it is reduced to writing, it can degrade or disappear after five hundred or so years have passed due to the impact of migrations or population disruptions caused by natural calamities, pestilence, or warfare. As a result, scholars have to employ other sources to aid in historical reconstruction.

The last of the triad of historical sources is the field of historical linguistics, which uses language as an archive to write history.<sup>12</sup> Specifically, historical linguists study language contacts and movements between different speakers through the reconstruction and classification of proto-languages.

Linguists classify related languages into large categories called phyla. A common ancestral language connects the languages in a phylum. By assessing contemporary languages, linguists are able to reconstruct the proto-language which allows them to discern contact between peoples, along with the resultant political, social, economic, and cultural changes. Though dating is less precise, the strength of historical linguistics as a methodology is that it can be used to construct historical narratives that go back several thousands of years.

Before the 1950s, scholars did not have clarity about the number of African language phyla or their ages, which actually surpassed their European equivalents, like Indo-European, which dated to about 6000 B.C.E. The work of the linguists Joseph Greenberg and Malcolm Guthrie improved our understanding of African language phyla and the languages contained in them.<sup>13</sup>

From Greenberg's work, we have identified the four native language phyla in Africa. These are Khoi-San, Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic, and Nilo-Saharan. Khoi-San is the oldest language phylum in Africa and the world, dating back approximately 20,000 years. The largest phylum is Niger-Congo, which contains the largest subgroup, Bantu. Approximately three-quarters of all African languages are found in this subgroup. The Afro-Asiatic language phylum exists mainly in the Horn of Africa and includes the Western Semitic languages, including Amharic and Arabic. Lastly, speakers in the Nilo-

Saharan language phylum reside mainly in the Sahel region and include many pastoralist African communities that traditionally survived the dry environment through seasonal migration with their livestock.

Scholars have used historical linguistics to write the history of the Bantu Migrations from approximately 3500 B.C E., which was, arguably, the most significant migration in Africa since the expansion of Homo Sapiens. Moreover, the insights of historical linguistics have helped to debunk the myth that the East African coastal peoples, the Swahili, were not originally Africans.

This short essay has attempted to spread more knowledge about the rich diversity of early African history by exploring a distortion of African history, the idea that Africa had no history. Writing, oral tradition, and historical linguistics have played important roles as source materials in filling gaps in early African historical knowledge while disproving popular myths.

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