

AHR Forum

The End of Prehistory? An Africanist Comment

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THE STORY IS ALREADY WELL TOLD that history as a professional discipline developed out of the rise of the nation-state and nationalism, with an emphasis on methodological rigor that is based on institutional archives.¹ This origin came along, however, with an impoverished diet of methodology that has since conditioned the growth of a stunted historiography, especially with the elision of about 99 percent of human temporal experience from the purview of historical inquiry. Thus the period referred to as prehistory, because of its lack of documentary sources, is considered unfit for historians proper but is deemed the appropriate purview of archaeologists and ethnohistorians. This has been good for building disciplinary boundaries, but not without the consequence of truncating historical consciousness.² These temporal barriers, created by nationalism and colonialism, have been a subject of criticism by scholars who are committed to the study of the deep past. It is not surprising that this endeavor was pioneered by scholars interested in the long-term history of recently colonized societies.³ Hence, in the introduction to *Three Thousand Years in Africa: Man and His Environment in the Lake Chad Region of Nigeria* (1981), Graham Connah defiantly wrote:

The study of Man's past should be indivisible and there can be no such thing as an historical time before history: providing that we define history as the whole natural history of Man and not his written history only. Thus to write about Africa's past it is essential to step over some of the traditional academic boundaries.⁴

The shadowy tail of prehistory indeed tends to be very long in those parts of the world that either experienced European colonialism in the past five hundred years or did not adopt writing as a mode of representation. What is considered historical

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¹ Eckhardt Fuchs and Benedikt Stuchtey, eds., *Across Cultural Borders: Historiography in Global Perspective* (Lanham, Md., 2002); Q. Edward Wang and Georg G. Iggers, eds., *Turning Points in Historiography: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Rochester, N.Y., 2002).

² Akinwumi Ogundiran, *Crises of Culture and Consciousness in the Postcolony: What Is the Future for Nigeria?* (Ibadan, 2012).

³ Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (1982; repr., Berkeley, Calif., 1997).

⁴ Graham Connah, *Three Thousand Years in Africa: Man and His Environment in the Lake Chad Region of Nigeria* (Cambridge, 1981).