

Africa Encountered: European Contacts and Evidence 1450-1700

Review Number: 39

Publish date: Tuesday, 1 July, 1997

Author: P. E. H. Hair

ISBN: 9780860786269

Date of Publication: 1997

Price: £75.00

Pages: 346pp.

Publisher: Variorum

Publisher url: http://www.ashgate.com/default.aspx?page=637&calcTitle=1&title_id=2901&edition_id=3365

Place of Publication: N/A

Reviewer: Robin Law

Paul Hair, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Liverpool, is best known as one of the pioneers of the academic study of the history of sub-Saharan (or in Hair's own preferred terminology, Black) Africa from the 1950s onwards. This volume re-prints a selection of his published output, comprising eleven articles (one in two parts, so effectively 12 items) which appeared between 1966 and 1992. These are reproduced without emendation, retaining even their original various fonts and separate paginations; with only very limited notes of corrections and additions appended. There is also a Bibliography of the author's publications, not of their totality but of those specifically in the fields of 'African and World History'; and a brief (5 pages) Introduction which sets the selected essays in their historiographical context.

The articles selected for inclusion represent only one aspect of Hair's work on the history of pre-colonial sub-Saharan Africa, concentrating on the earliest period of direct Afro-European relations: essentially, the period of Portuguese dominance in western African trade, from the original discovery of the coast in the fifteenth century to the eclipse of the Portuguese by the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century; though some of the items take in a rather longer time-scale, to the end of the seventeenth century (and in one case, a study of the evolution of the linguistic form and denotation of the toponym 'Sierra Leone', even beyond, down into modern times). Of the eleven items, four deal specifically with Sierra Leone, the locus of Hair's original detailed research; five with western Africa ('Guinea') more generally; while two represent excursions outside the author's usual geographical field, into south-east Africa.

Even within the geographical and chronological parameters specified, the articles in this volume comprise not the totality, but only a selection of Hair's output, though the basis for the selection is not made explicit. Hair himself characterizes the selected items as 'groundwork in European sources on Black Africa' (Introduction, vii). In fact, they do not include any of his (very valuable) critical analyses of particular sources, but they do rest upon meticulous detailed analysis of the available primary evidence: in Hair's own self-characterization (p.ix), involving 'complicated comparisons, long footnotes, and nothing more exciting than the regular expression of doubts about the evidential soundness of current generalizations'. Four of the essays deal essentially with European enterprise in western Africa: two with the Portuguese - a general survey of the Portuguese 'discovery' of Guinea (dealt with in terms of intellectual, rather than narrowly maritime history), and a study of an abortive scheme for settlement in Sierra Leone; and two with early

English voyages to western Africa, representing incursions into what was still an established Portuguese sphere of influence - one of these seeking to contextualize the curiosity of the first recorded performance of the tragedy 'Hamlet', which was on an English vessel moored off the coast in 1607. One deals with an aspect of the legacy of early European contact, in a study of historical toponymy (on the changing form and denotation of the name 'Sierra Leone'); and one with the provisioning of the Portuguese garrison at Sofala, in south-eastern Africa, in the early sixteenth century, a question which is approached philologically, seeking to identify various cereals mentioned in the records. Two essays deal specifically with the linguistic aspect of early Afro-European contact, exploring the critical practical question of how communication was achieved: what languages were used, and what knowledge of African languages did Europeans gain? This linguistic interest leads on to what might be regarded as the empirical core of the corpus, representing over a third of the whole, three articles (published in 1966-7) mapping out European knowledge of ethnic and linguistic groups on the west African coast in the first two and a half centuries of contact. This is done for no antiquarian purpose, but to sustain the thesis of long-term 'ethnolinguistic continuity' in the region, as against the picture of frequent displacements and reconstitutions of ethnic groups suggested by an uncritical reading of local oral traditions. They also serve to illustrate the potential of detailed study of European sources for the reconstruction of indigenous African history, as well that of European activities in Africa.

Hair characterizes his own approach, as illustrated in these essays and by comparison with the work of other historians of Africa, not only in terms of its concentration on the critical analysis of conventional written (which in practice, means mainly European) sources, but also in terms of his eschewing generalization in favour of a particularistic focus. His evident distaste for generalization is reflected in some defensiveness about his own forays in this direction; the most explicitly generalizing item in this collection, which happens also to be the most recently published (1992), on the Portuguese discovery of Guinea, is self-deprecatingly described as the product of the author's 'senescent maturity' (p.x). This opposition between the particular and the general, however, seems somewhat rhetorical, and does not do justice to the significance of Hair's scholarly contribution. However narrowly focused, these essays do more than simply challenge existing generalizations; they also provide the basis, albeit mostly implicitly, for alternative generalizations on the nature and impact of early Afro-European contact. The argument for 'ethnolinguistic continuity', for example, certainly demolished the existing general framework within which early modern African history was approached, but it substituted an alternative more plausible general framework, rather than leaving a vacuum. Empirical solidity may make possible better generalization, and need not undermine the validity of any generalization.

Some problems are also presented by Hair's account of the the historiographical setting of his work, as given in his Introduction. He self-consciously sets himself against what he sees as the dominant trends within academic African history, in his focus on detailed analysis and criticism of written sources, and more specifically European sources. By contrast, the mainstream of African historical studies is condemned both for neglecting the systematic search for written sources, and for failing to apply the usual standards of academic historical scholarship to their interpretation and evaluation. One difficulty here is that there is a certain ambiguity over whether these remarks are intended to describe the milieu of African academic history at its beginning, in the 1950s and 60s, or to apply more generally, down to the present. Thus, while Hair is right to say that the discipline of source criticism traditional in other fields of history was generally neglected in the early days of the development of African history, this has become somewhat less true during the last few years. One symptom of this shift has been the institution by the African Studies Association, in 1993, of a Text Prize, specifically for work in the critical editing of source material. Ironically, although entirely appropriately, the inaugural winner of the prize was a work co-edited by Hair himself: the critical edition/translation of the description of Guinea by the French trader Jean Barbot (published by the Hakluyt Society).

Also, the explanation which Hair offers of this neglect of the fundamental task of source criticism does not carry complete conviction. In fact, he offers a range of supplementary explanations, rather than a single one. The first suggestion is that the desire to reconstruct an 'Afrocentric' history led to a conscious neglect of European sources, as necessarily biased, and 'a cult of oral traditions', which were presented as offering the

basis for an indigenous African perspective (p.vii). While there is clearly something in this, it may be suggested that, insofar as there was a 'cult' of oral tradition, this was perhaps due mainly to the belief that there were few written sources available, rather than that those that were available were irremediably biased; as Hair himself notes elsewhere (item VII, 268), there was a general failure to appreciate the wealth of material which was, in fact, to be found in early European written sources. Far from facing a paucity of such evidence, African historical studies have as yet done no more than scratch the surface of what is available. But in any case, it may be suggested that the 'cult of oral traditions' was to a large degree rhetoric. The pioneering works of academic African history in the 1950s - K.O. Dike's 'Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta' (1956) and S.O. Biobaku's 'The Egba and their Neighbours' (1957) - actually made very limited use of oral sources (and in the case of Biobaku, these were mainly oral sources in written form - in published histories by local amateur scholars), but were based on conventional written sources, the records of European government, commercial and missionary agencies. And this has generally remained true of work on the history of coastal western Africa. Serious attempts to write history on the basis of oral tradition were more characteristic of East and Central rather than West Africa, and generally related to areas in the interior for which there were, literally, no European sources at all for the pre-colonial period (as with B.A. Ogot's, 'History of the Southern Luo', 1967). Moreover, although early enthusiasm for the potential of oral traditions as historical sources was often uncritical, work done since the 1970s has produced greater sensitivity to the difficulties involved in their interpretation and evaluation.

It remains true that early work on pre-nineteenth African century history often displayed a disregard of (or perhaps unawareness of) the normal standards of criticism of written sources. Hair's second suggested explanation for this failing is that, in the hurry to constitute African history as an academic discipline, general synthesis was privileged to the expense of detailed scholarship: there was too much 'grand exposition of major regional and national histories' (or less politely, too much 'crude global theorizing'), too little detailed work on 'very limited localities and areas of record' (p.viii). This too seems to me doubtful. Although there was of course pressure in the early days to produce textbooks for use in schools and universities, the earliest published monographs of academic African history (Dike, Biobaku etc.) studied specific areas rather than regional or continental themes. Intellectual reputations in the field of African history were made out of detailed scholarship rather than grand synthesis. The 'global theorizing' of which Hair complains was hardly in evidence in African history prior to 1970s, with the hegemony first of neo-Marxist 'dependency' theory and then of Althusserian Marxism, and even these proved no more than ephemeral fashions. Over the long run, it might be suggested that African historical studies have been characterized (and arguably, weakened) by a lack of theory rather than the reverse.

Hair suggests that his own preference for 'the tedious duty of digging out all extant primary sources and examining them in detail' reflects the fact that, rather than being trained a specifically African historian, he had 'drifted' into the field through the accidental circumstance of being employed in universities in Africa, in Sierra Leone and Nigeria, in the 1950s and '60s. This, however, does not differentiate him from others in the pioneering generation, whose training was necessarily likewise outside African history. I have sometimes thought that the weakness of source criticism in African history was due to the fact that this pioneering generation was constituted by scholars trained in modern history, rather than in the fields of medieval or Classical history, where the problematic nature of fragmentary source material imposes more explicit attention to its critical analysis. (Or, to put the matter more personally, I had thought that my own interest in source criticism - still somewhat eccentric among Africanists of a younger generation - was a carry-over from my initial training as a Classicist.) But this schema cannot account for the phenomenon of Hair himself, whose initial research was on nineteenth-century British social history. Perhaps it is ultimately fruitless to look for such general explanations; in what was a very small field, much may be attributable to the accident of individual character and predilection. The profession should be grateful that, among much shoddy work, Paul Hair with some others maintained a commitment to traditional standards of meticulous detailed scholarship; and while he clearly savours self-image as a maverick individual going against the trend, his scholarship has perhaps been accorded, however belatedly, greater recognition than he allows.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/39#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/324>

[2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>