

However, if read in conjunction with the historical material to which Schoeman refers, this is a valuable, carefully and lovingly-researched addition to the historiography of the eighteenth century. Schoeman's enthusiasm for his subject, as with all his work, is evident through-out, as is his desire to popularise history beyond academic circles.

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## Modern day *groit* on ancient African accomplishment

CHRISTOPHER EHRET, *An African classical age: Eastern and Southern Africa in world history, 1000 B.C. to A.D. 400*

University Press of Virginia/James Currey, Charlottesville/Oxford

2001

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Christopher Ehret has been writing African history from a linguistic perspective since the 1960's. As a young historian he was involved in one of the major formative periods in the development of the new academic African historiographical tradition that followed in the wake of the continental drift towards decolonisation. At the time, the *Journal of African History* was making its mark as a major scholarly platform for airing superlative work by a few interdisciplinary historians who had gone well beyond merely exploring the avenues of anthropology, archaeology and political history in isolation from each other. They had in fact started opening up the histories of a rich, colourful and vibrant continent. There was a wealth of knowledge that had hardly been tapped.

In his early writings Ehret made provocative and experimental observations. He paved the way for other researchers to join him in opening up new avenues of investigation. In a sense he was part of the vanguard of scholars exploring new routes to the African past. Ehret was not only influenced by Jan Vansina's pioneering work on oral tradition, but also looked at language in terms of the fascinating world that etymological investigation could open up.

In his latest work, *An African classical age: Eastern and Southern Africa in world history, 1000 B.C. to A.D. 400* (which was published in hard cover for the

first time in 1998) the mature Ehret offers the reader an exquisite portrayal of the African past. His focused knowledge on East Africa is used to explore Southern African history and simultaneously provide the contextual elements for the incorporation of an Africanist discourse on world history.

In some respects the author is a modern day *groit* telling the story of African accomplishment in a classical age – the period 1 000 B.C. to 400 A.D. It was an era when the cultural and economic foundations were laid that decidedly shaped the course of humankind between Uganda and (KwaZulu) Natal (p. 1). It affected no less than one fifth of the continent (p. 285).

The work comprises a comprehensive discussion of the industrial transitions that took place during this period. Apart from the transition from stone to iron for toolmaking that was still in process, there was also the trend towards the domestication of agricultural and pastoral pursuits, the development of commerce and the integration of diverse cultural communities. For example, in contextualising the agricultural revolution in Eastern Africa during the last millennium B.C. Ehret explains it was but one of eight global districts in the world where similar activities were the order of the day (p. 5). Furthermore the commercial revolution, which started in the classical age under the guidance of capable political rulers, had far reaching consequences for local populations. The great distances that existed between suppliers and consumers had the effect of promoting integration and the transmission of skills to local agents (pp. 16-7).

Some of Ehret's objectives in writing the book succeed. Others are less successful and will be open to more conjecture in the years to come. To begin with, *World History*, like *Philosophy of History*, has for the past two centuries meant different things to different people in different parts of the world. Although it is difficult to point a finger at the author for not adopting an Africanist approach, the general synthesis of Africa into the discourse on the rest of the world's past has not yet reached the level of intensive and sophisticated debate. It may still take many years to provide the stories of Africa with a cosmopolitan reference framework in mind. But having made this statement, there is little more to criticize in the work. The work is of a pioneering nature and will undoubtedly tickle the interests of many prospective undergraduate history students in time to come.

Ehret is not a historian easily given to broad sweeps of historical description. Instead he is an artist working with a broad paintbrush on the canvas of a small portrait. The result is that he opts for deep and detailed description in an effort to gain credence for a discourse that is steeped in the understanding of linguistic change and cultural dynamics – broad areas of focus. His shift from the meta-level to the micro-level is done frequently with many of the latest research findings in archaeology and environmental studies. In the process he opens up vistas of a past that is all but forgotten in the spoken word of everyday African life. Above all Ehret does not want to opt for a short, sweet singular explanation for what happened. Instead he warns “monocausal explanations always fall short

of making adequate sense of historical change” (p. 292). From this perspective his hesitation in using broad sweeps of creative insight to account for the past makes sound sense.

The sensitive and thoroughgoing investigation of language, Ehret suggests, pays dividends. It becomes possible for the historian to determine at what point in time a society changed in the process of tool making, for example from stone to iron. He singles out developments in the Mashariki societies between 3 000 and 1 000 B.C. and points out how the major lithic forms took on the shape of polished stone axes (p. 110). What begins as a linguistic analysis of ancient words that have a direct bearing only on diverse forms of human industry, increasingly becomes a romance of linguistic traces that enable the author to reflect on cultural accomplishments such as leatherwork, “prehistoric” art and ancient forms of music (pp. 252-260). Another art historical dimension that can be explored fruitfully is the transformations in architectural shapes of domestic dwellings and the layout of villages in East Africa during the classical age (pp. 114-8). There are many similar jewels of description that can be extracted from this comprehensive study.

One of the major advantages of *An African classical age* is that it avoids the traditionalist approach of archaeological histories of Southern Africa. Instead of going into the history of the way archaeological research, methods and theories have changed our thinking since the nineteenth century, Ehret looks at the Southern African landscape and its peoples from the perspective of an African historian. He is essentially a narrativist, telling a compelling story of how the contact between people shaped their combined destinies. It is especially in this context that the work should appeal to the working historian. Instead of providing a mass of convincing references, Ehret briefly mentions the shortcomings in the current state of knowledge and the work that needs to be done. As a committed historian he is aware of many opportunities for fruitful research. Nor does he hesitate to criticize his own youthful ventures into the African past making constructive and incisive new appraisals – the sign of an active and dedicated researcher (Reference 6, p. 216).

There is another reason why the work is valuable for Southern African historians. For a long time it has been known that East Africa has played an important role in shaping the history of the southern subcontinent. Ehret looks at southern Africa from a spatially external perspective– far to the north and northeast of the Limpopo and the Zambezi River. As an African historian his sentiments are clearly with the continent and its peoples. The story of southern Africa and its sparsely conserved past images are side issues rather than a dominant discourse. If there is a bias it is shaped by the selection of words and not ideology. When the Khoikhoi past is addressed, it is not for the sake of determining the earliest ‘indigenous’ identity of one of Southern Africa’s links with the later iron age. Instead the object of the discussion is to explain the significance of a community’s transformation from hunting and gathering to pastoralism. On the whole the history of Africa takes centre stage. It is

ultimately intended to lead to a better understanding of world history.

*An African classical age* is clearly aimed at readers who appreciate the complexities of a multi-disciplinary understanding of the past. There is also however a strand of hope for the uninitiated. Each detailed narrative description is concluded with a clear summary. Maps abound. They serve as visual aids to understanding cultural shifts and transformations that took place over three millennia. For the student of linguistics, the text includes numerous tables for detailed comparisons of a wide variety of words. This information is further enhanced by additional tables of evidence of words contained in two appendices (pp. 299-332).

On the whole *An African classical age* is a solid work. The only point of criticism could perhaps be references to contemporary regional entities. Since 1994 names such as the Transvaal and Natal have vanished. What used to be the Transvaal is today subdivided into the Northern Province, Mpumalange, the Northwest Province and Gauteng. Similarly Natal today comprises the province known as KwaZulu Natal. The same changes may have taken place in South Africa's neighbouring states. It is likely that the old terminology for place names will still persist for some time to come amongst subject specialists. Somewhere they will however have to make the necessary changes. For the rest Ehret's work deserves praise for opening up some interesting insights on our perspectives of the local African past at the start of yet another millennium in the history of the world.

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## Cherished theme becomes a book

LOUIS CHANGUION, *Silence of the guns: the history of the Long Toms of the Anglo-Boer War*

Protea Book House, Pretoria,

2001.

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