What is ‘African’ History?

History is the study and interpretation of the past. Knowledge about the past is vital to our individual and collective understanding of our identities and position in local, regional, and global communities. While the study of history has its detractors, those who believe history to be a collection of myth and fiction or see no value in understanding the past, the earliest academic undertakings have included historical inquiry. As such, history is one of the oldest academic disciplines. However, there has been considerable disagreement on what people, places, events, or themes are worthwhile to study in a historical context. Even worse, some historians have steadfastly asserted that not all peoples and regions even have a history. As absurd as this sounds today, it is perhaps the primary reason why “African” history as a full-fledged academic discipline is relatively new. Here, we will explore the birth of African history as a legitimate field for historical inquiry and reflect on the challenges of recording and interpreting African history.

In the early 19th century, the German philosopher Hegel, in his seminal Lectures on the Philosophy of History, declared that “[Africa] is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit.”¹ Over 100 years later, in 1965, then Oxford University professor Hugh Trevor-Roper echoed Hegel’s sentiment. He declared that “[p]erhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, ... and darkness is not a subject of history.”² Such sentiments are indicative of a racist worldview and a general disbelief of African achievements. Besides racism,

However, statements denying that Africa has a history are rooted in a crucial conception of valid historical sources. It was believed that societies’ developments towards change and progress needed to be recorded in written form at the general time that they occurred. It was this insistence on written documents that rendered Africa’s past invisible to the historian in particular and the wider public in general. Most African peoples did not develop writing systems until the 19th and 20th centuries. Hence, there was a paucity of written records that historians could draw on to study Africa’s past. The few written accounts stemmed from outside observers such as early European merchants and travelers. Hence, it was widely held that Africa had no history.

Once it was acknowledged that Africa indeed had a history, it was limited to Africa’s colonial history. After all, the European colonial administrations, missionaries, and businessmen kept detailed accounts of their activities and observations on the African continent. Therefore, historians could draw on written records to study Africa’s colonial past. This study, however, was limited to Europe’s colonial undertakings, what Europe brought to Africa, and the history of white settler communities. Africans only featured on the margins of early “African” history studies. This is not to say that all students of African history limited themselves to the continent’s European colonial past; there were a few historians who certainly attempted to find Africa’s past. But the monumental change in African history as a legitimate academic discipline did not come about until the 1960s.

African history might have remained a side note to European colonial history had it not been for the convergence of several dynamics in the 1950s and 1960s. Most importantly, Africa’s independence movements and eventual decolonization gave rise to a newfound interest in Africa. The decolonization of the African continent, beginning with Ghana in 1957 and continuing through
the 1960s, captivated scholars and general audiences throughout the world. People demanded to know more about Africa and its societies. Especially African peoples, encouraged by their liberation from colonial control and the associated enthusiasm for the future, began to seek a deeper understanding of their own past. Hence, a scholarly explosion in the search for Africa’s past took place.

Two additional dynamics that furthered the field of African studies are the civil rights movement in the United States and the beginnings of the Cold War. The civil rights movement engendered a greater interest into the roots of African-American culture as well as the social histories of slave communities. A new curiosity for Africa’s present and past emerged. The Cold War prompted governments on both sides of the bipolar world structure to foster area studies at colleges and universities. For diplomatic and strategic purposes governments needed individuals with extensive backgrounds in the histories, politics, cultures, and languages of the world’s regions. Thus, decolonization, the civil rights movement, and the Cold War provided the much needed impetus to study African history. African history began to extend beyond its colonial past and it began to provide an African perspective on Africa’s past.

It is in the 1960s, then, that the field of African studies in general and African history in particular gained legitimacy as a scholarly discipline. Perhaps the inception of the *Journal of African History* in 1960 by two British academics in conjunction with Cambridge University Press is most indicative of this acceptance. Compiling and writing African history has grown significantly over the last five decades and so have the methods employed by historians to gain knowledge of Africa’s past. While it was then freely accepted that Africa has a history, historians were, and continue to be,

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3 These academics were historians John Fage and Roland Oliver.
faced with a dearth of written records. Traditional methodologies that rely on the examination and interpretation of documents proved unsatisfactory as these mostly provided an outsider’s view into Africa. Hence, historians began to seek out other sources of information and methodologies to gain insight into Africa’s past.

Non-literate societies clearly did not leave any written documentation behind; however, their histories are passed on through oral traditions. Deriving historical data from oral traditions is one of the methods employed by African historians. Most, if not all, African societies have a rich culture of oral traditions whereby knowledge and information about the past is passed on to the next generation through storytelling and ceremonial oral traditions. These oral traditions yield much information about the past; but they also prove very problematic for rigorous historical inquiry. Questions of authenticity, transmission, and reliability abound. Nonetheless, oral traditions continue to remain an important source of information.

In the search for additional sources of information, African historians have turned to other social and natural sciences. Archaeology, linguistics, physical and cultural anthropology, botany, and art history are among the sciences that have contributed to our current understanding of Africa’s past. Physical artifacts uncovered and studied by archaeologists and vocabularies and structures of African languages compiled and interpreted by linguists exemplify critical sources of information for African history. Such details reveal information about relationships and movements of African peoples. African history, then, very much relies on a multi- and interdisciplinary approach in its inquiries. It is the information yielded from a multitude of scholarly pursuits that allows for the fullest documentation and interpretation of Africa’s past.

The study of African history has evolved to become a genuine
academic discipline. It has contributed greatly to historical methodologies as well as the historiographies of world and regional studies. In addition to enriching our knowledge of the African continent and its rich and diverse histories, African history has made significant contributions to the thematic areas of social history, economic history, women’s history, Africans in the diaspora, local history, and world history.