

“IT IS A JOB I WOULD LIKE”

I

When I first proposed founding a journal in 1973, while teaching at the Centre of West African Studies of the University of Birmingham, I had four broad, if also vague, ends in mind: archival reports, text criticism, historiography, and comparative studies.¹ I first floated the idea with Philip Curtin, and certainly had no reason to be particularly sanguine that anything concrete would eventuate. Timing must have been everything, because James Duffy, the Executive Director of the African Studies Association, soon wrote me saying that Phil had mentioned the idea to him and, since the Association was then in a mood to foster publications, well, maybe something could come of the notion.

Matters progressed, fitfully and no doubt very slowly for the anguished editor-in-waiting. In a letter dated 26 February 1974, Jim Duffy wrote that “[w]e would expect the first editor to be responsible for the first three years of the annual.” In my reply of 7 March I wrote that “my own feeling is that I would like to remain editor more or less *ad infinitum*—it is a job I would like both in its mechanics and from my commitment to the utility of such a journal.”

In a further letter dated 17 May 1974 I promised to “see that every mistake is corrected and every ambiguity resolved for the typist’s sake,” going so far as to commit myself that I would be “disappointed if there were so much as a single cryptic footnote citation,” at least in volume 1! For the first several years *I* was that typist, retyping every contribution to ensure a clean copy for the printers, but gave this unwelcome chore up in favor of dealing with local typists to produce camera-ready copy. Eventually word-processing and then e-mail found me, and all was well. Of course I needed

¹For details see my “On Method,” *HA* 1(1974), 1-7, where I emphasized the comparative approach.

to rely on those more skilled in page formatting than I was and have been lucky indeed to have had Jeff Kaufmann doing this reliably and intelligently for the past many years.

II

Having a publisher meant coming up with a product, and I was fortunate that enough contributors could be persuaded to audition for the new journal that the maiden issue appeared not much more than a year later, after some toing and froing regarding length, name, mailing lists, and a potpourri of minor issues. On 27 September 1974 I sent off the typescript for volume 1, but kept adding dribs and drabs for another month. No doubt this contributed to *HA* 1974 appearing only in April of 1975, far outside our target date of late October 1974 in time for the Annual Meeting in Chicago that year. At 182 pages this proved to be considerably longer than the 128-page sized number that had originally somehow surfaced as a norm.

But enough prehistory. While editors and publishers are necessary, they are no more than the curators of the body of work created over time by a journal's contributors, and there, I think, *History in Africa* has been fortunate. Like a plane taking off, the size of *HA* continued gradually but inexorably to rise, from 182 pages to over 500 pages in many later issues. It is worth noting that among the contributors to the first few issues were Robin Law and Jan Vansina, whose work is also represented in this number, 35 years on, and others have contributed over spans of twenty years or more. Along the way, about 800 articles have appeared by authors residing in some 30 countries. How many of these would have otherwise appeared, in more traditional venues is anyone's guess—mine is that only a small minority would have found their way, or even have been written.

While little has fallen short of my modest initial hopes, I must admit to disappointment that controversial points of view—or even those less controversial, but not therefore necessarily right—have only seldom been challenged. I had envisaged—apparently under the influence of some latter-day ambrosia—numerous and contentious conversations about evidence and interpretation that would in sum advance our knowledge—or if necessary our ignorance—about various issues, for all history, perhaps especially African history, teems with uncertainties. This simply failed to happen very often, or at least often enough—a pity. On the other hand, the onset of the internet has allowed controversy to flourish in the atmosphere of an all but immediate comment-and-response cycle.

Perhaps even more disappointing has been the paucity of comparative approaches. In my foreword noted above, I wrote that "*History in Africa*

hopes in time to become very broadly comparative and to encourage useful colloquy among the various discrete units of the discipline [of history].” This goal must be written off as largely unachieved, although a few papers dealing with non-African topics have appeared. In aid of this, from 1974 through 1984 *History in Africa* included a “comparative bibliography” that eventually ran to nearly fifty pages annually, but I gave this up when I could no longer convince myself that it was serving any purpose—that body of water was simply not being drunk.

As of this writing, it is uncertain what will happen to *History in Africa*, so I will close by saying that it is (naturally) my hope that it can carry as it has for so long, and that its contributor base will become increasingly larger, more diversified, and more engaged. I am hopeful in this because, it seems to me, African historiography has come farther faster than is true for most new fields of history. The natural optimism of the beginning became tempered sooner than might have been expected, and intramural rumination has not been wanting (despite my comment above), while new sources have been discovered and put to use with encouraging frequency. It is true that to some degree the study of Africa’s past has followed the various siren songs of new departures that have characterized not only history but most other disciplines as well, but throughout—and in contrast to the limited half life of most of these new ‘paradigms’—a core cadre of truth-seekers has continued to practice, opening up new vistas by dint of mining for new evidence rather than being content to adopt new theories.

[DH]