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AFRICANS' MEMORIES AND CONTEMPORARY HISTORY OF AFRICA

B. JEWSIEWICKI AND V. Y. MUDIMBE

I

The history of black Africa, even until recently, existed for the outside world only through the written word of its European conquerors. Today it has come into being as an autonomous discipline. No one would dare to propose now, as did some scholars in the middle of this century, that there might be an African past, but that for lack of writing its history does not exist. Mastery of time, if one were to agree with them on this subject, was rapidly slipping by for black African societies. This “technical” incapacity could only reinforce the exclusion of a continent which, according to Hegel, did not belong to the universal future of a conscious humanity.

This exclusion from Judeo-Christian historicity, which offered itself as a universal norm of reason, firmly guided the struggle in the 1950s and 1960s of African intellectuals educated in the West. Their demand was concerned with African dignity and with what had expressly been denied to them: the right to universality, and thus the acknowledgment of African contributions to the make-up of humanity. In the conjuncture of that time, next to the arts which had a primary status, was the development of a historicity implying the factual reconstruction of Africa's past. Intellectuals took as their main inspiration the heritage of blacks from the diaspora who, in their struggle for the recognition of their own humanity, had dedicated themselves to the search for relics of blacks' experiences and presence in the West. Their aim was essentially to establish the legitimacy of black humanity in the heart of a culture based as it was on Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian contributions by Enlightenment thinkers. This struggle, then, could only lead to a correction of the imposture represented by the Hegelian philosophy of history.

In the beginning of the West, there is pharaonic Egypt whose essence was black; such is the assumption of the Egyptian philosophy of history that Cheikh Anta Diop's controversial works launched in the West against the Hegelian paradigm. Paradoxically, one would note that like many other eminent African intellectuals of the time, Diop is astonishingly faithful to Hegel. He conceptualizes in a similar manner the “colonial parenthesis” of African history – a period corresponding to a sort of descent into hell and deserving only to be forgotten.

In both cases, Africa's future is reorganized and articulated on the foundations of a glorious past. While Cheikh Anta Diop traces it back to the Egypt of the Pharaohs, Joseph Ki-Zerbo and J. F. Ade Ajayi establish that past as less distant, corresponding more or less to precolonial Africa.¹

Following *négritude*, a concept invented in the mid-1930s by Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor which established in the West and in the world the recognition of black African cultures, historiography buckled down to demonstrate the historicity of African societies. Tensions reigned between university professional historians and partisans of a philosophical perception of the past similar to that of Cheikh Anta Diop, but all of them believed that it was necessary to reconcile the discourse on the past with a political philosophy of the present. The first group envisaged this political philosophy of the present in terms of histories of national states; the second group (Diop and the historians of the diaspora) dreamed of a unitary African state.

During the three decades (1960–1990) that saw African history affirm itself as a university discipline, the state was thus privileged as a historical subject. We now have access to two fundamental works: *General History of Africa*, sponsored by UNESCO, and the *Cambridge History of Africa*. In one generation, university knowledge of Africa has become an integral part of the official histories of humanity. Moreover, a vast amount of information has been placed before us through massive projects such as the collection and translation of oral discourses on the past of hundreds of societies; their analysis and comparison with written data coming from Western and Muslim cultures; the development of archeology, linguistics, history of technologies; and also, thanks to the imagination and rigor of researchers confronting chronological fluctuations of orality, we can rewrite and rethink the history of Africa. Good popular works exist too, notably by French educated scholars such as Ibrahim Kake and Elikia M'Bokolo. UNESCO, on the other hand, foresees both an abridged version of its monumental work as well as its translation into African languages. Nevertheless, the knowledge acquired by university historiography is still barely integrated into the teaching of history in Africa. This problem is even more acute because of the crisis of publishing and the diffusion of books on the African continent.

Recourse to oral traditions is obviously not specific to African historiography. However, university legitimation and methodological developments of African historiography have been a direct result of its application in Africa, a movement pioneered by Jan Vansina from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. The analysis of oral traditions demanded from the beginning a real collaboration among historians, anthropologists, and linguists. It has generally led to a blurring of frontiers between these disciplines, and further to the acceptance by a large group of scholars of the anthropological concept of "ethnographic pres-

1. Joseph Ki-Zerbo, *Histoire de l'Afrique noire* (Paris, 1972); J. F. Ade Ajayi, "Colonialism: An Episode in African History" in *Colonialism in Africa*, ed. P. Duignan and L. H. Gann (Cambridge, Eng., 1969), I, 497–509.

ent.” As a result, we have seen the creation of an artificial division of the African past into two periods, the colonization period constituting a major border. Precolonial history was then presented as the melting-pot of truly African experiences; colonial history was neglected because it was perceived as a parenthesis, a time of acculturation and of domination. From the concept of “ethnographic present” also came the idea, now out of fashion, that Africa would be a living museum of the evolution of humanity.

The idea that oral traditions do not deserve our attention, and further that they exist only for the precolonial period, is false and even dangerous. This idea can be linked to another conception, no less erroneous, that African societies completely lost control of their future during the colonial period. This has given rise to a number of myths. An urbanized African would then be, from a cultural standpoint, a “bastard”; only the rural and thus “traditional” African would be the incarnation of Africanness. These presuppositions have strongly marked the scholarly politics of Africanism, and particularly those of African anthropology. At least in this field, researchers have dedicated their work to the narration of traditions either of a state or of courts ruled by important chiefs. A feeling of urgency pushed research towards the oldest tradition, for according to a saying in vogue: “Every time one of the elders dies, a library disappears.”

The tendency was thus to valorize the documentary aspect of oral historical discourses. However, the desire to legitimize oral traditions as archival documents washed over the fact that they are also historical discourses. Both a West African *griot*, for example, and the “traditionalist” associated with the court of a precolonial state, are both, even above all, historians in the ordinary sense of the term.

The 1960s saw a transformation in the practice of African history. This was a period in which classical historical criticism was adapted to dovetail with the analysis of oral data. The need to prove to a rather skeptical world the validity of the concept of African history led to studies trying to show that the oral mode of conserving information guarantees its transmission and can be just as faithful to facts as the written. Since the 1970s Africanists have exhibited a lively interest in social history, and more recently, in intellectual history. Historians are bringing closer attention to micro-histories. Thus do we learn to respect and to affirm the continuity of knowledge of the past which African societies have always produced. Africans have been writing their history for centuries in many parts of the continent, since Muslim culture offered them an instrument: the Arabic alphabet. The states of Sahelian Africa, for example, allowed and integrated into their lives and their cultures those literate people who had adopted that instrument from abroad, writing. There, as in other places on the planet, Africans tell, sing, produce (through dance, recitation, marionette puppets), sculpt, and paint their history. Just like other peoples, they have always sought to master their past, have had their historic discourses which render and interpret the facts of the past, placing them in an explicative

and aesthetic frame producing the sense of their past. This sense of the past creates a line between the past, the present, and the future of Africa. This sense allows the production, in the domain of a historic science now enlarged to fit the dimensions of the world, of a discourse which is useful, true, and believable in itself as well as in its relationship with the facts that it interprets.

The time has come to accept the contribution of black “humanity” to the construction of our communal future. Egypt was an African civilization just as the Eve of humanity appears to have been African. We know too that Saint Augustine, the theorist of the “Western city,” belonged to a mixed culture, as did numerous people of letters and sciences after him. We can allow ourselves today a more calm view of the past, as of the historiographies of African societies. We know now that our university historiography—which in the past celebrated written history—is not the only valid one. Oral historiographies have always been bearers of norms and of logical systems for the interpretation of the past. Why must we consequently reduce them to mere archives, waiting for the gaze and the intelligence of some present-day historian?

II

Michel Foucault’s notion of “epistemological archeology” is essential to current efforts to reclaim African history as the narrative of group identity and political legitimacy. In order to understand the ways in which politics interacts with political culture and to map a clear picture of political legitimacy, the oral tradition itself must be deconstructed. While the currently popular notions of recollection and collective memory are more ambiguous concepts than “oral tradition,” they also represent rich, as yet untapped, resources for African societies. The opposition between “oral” and “written” has led many scholars to the mistaken conclusion that the oral tradition died when bureaucrats imposed the “written truth.” Less tainted by that opposition, memory in all its various forms can thus be used much more effectively than “oral tradition” to conceptualize the post-scripted spoken word.

The main problem of African social historiography is not the succession of written tradition to oral, but the interaction of the two traditions in a context politically dominated by the written. For years, African historiography was more sensitive to the politics of Western academia than to the social and political challenges faced by African societies. Indeed, over the past thirty years, African history specialists whose work has gained a place in international scholarship for Africa’s past have acted more like construction workers than researchers. Or, better yet, they have worked like urban planners, pencilling on their drafting tables expressways linking a “glorious past” to a “radiant future.” As a result, their quickly laid layer of asphalt covers the myriad ancient paths connecting the past to the present. Or, better still: a “written layer” now covers the oral and performative reconstructions of the past, employing them as, at best, mere building blocks.

Let us dwell on the notions of historical operation and that of historical time and, following Umberto Eco, define them as *fabula*, that is “the fundamental schemata of a narration, the logic of the actions and syntax of the characters, the temporal organization of events.”² The scientific spirit, the desire to conquer the world and submit it to the logic of rational thought, tends to eliminate magic, mythologies, and the supposedly irrational. In this historical context, the desire to understand and explain was able to establish itself as essential. Following the secularization of historical thought, it resulted in the construction of time measurement (the uniform time of histories, general measurement of time, and so on). It imposed as grammar the mathematics of history. Inventing a human time which itself is nothing more than a value-neutral series enables one to derive the meaning of the past “objectively,” as it were. The meaning will supposedly leap out by itself as the true relationships between the facts emerge from their positions with respect to one another in the series. The choice of facts avoids arbitrariness, avoids having them be the sole result of the researcher’s internal logic. Coming full circle, the hope of discovering (or confirming) the logic of reason, the law of the evolution or transformation, takes root. The Western historian (meaning here a professional “authorized” to produce the past) effectuates the passage from credibility without art or measure to a consciously cultivated identity which transforms time as the measurement of a process into time as the narrative of communication, to narration as illustrated in the *Annales* school.

Due to its apparent neutrality (and thus potential for transcultural extension), narrative time establishes a unidirectional time–space continuum (between the past and the future) which enables the “narrative provision” guided by the *fabula* to marginalize the semantic explanation and, to a certain extent, pass over the cultural framework of the present. The merchant’s time, prolonged in the West by the factory overseer’s pocket-watch, opens the way for the nominalist historicization of identity. One may wonder what might be the relationship among the time of the Muslim world, the creation of merchant communities in West Africa, the *Tarikhs*, and the writing of history? Narrative time contains a principle of authority that one might label dogmatic and which, via the closed *fabula*, imposes the narrative provision. Its generalization permits the secularization of identity without causing a radical power crisis.

We could say that in the advent of methodic history, when personal observation and oral evidence still dominated, historical time and the time of historical research coincided. The secularization of epistemology and the domination of institutional documents (archives being essentially made up of written documents produced during an institution’s statutory activity) modified this situation. From this perspective, it is clear that the referential real time investigated by a study is not the study’s time. As a result, it is most certainly not the time of the historicizing account either.

2. Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula* (Paris, 1985), 130, our translation.

The time of the historicizing account belongs to the “implied real,” the implicit in the realm of knowledge shared by historians and their readers. It is a time which is at the heart of the *fabula* and imposes a meaning onto life experiences. In effect historians produce history via a double selection—as they discriminate between traces and representations. Hartog has recently demonstrated this in his book on Herodotus.³ When Herodotus was acquiring the status of “the father of history,” Father Barthélemy said of him that he kept only what was “memorable.” The *fabula* of the account, its chronosophy, serve thus as the criteria for the selection. When one places the past at the heart of the present and shows that the present is a necessary product of the past, one transforms those elements of the past which contributed to the emergence of the present into memorable facts. Everything else, to use an expression of Lyotard, would prove to be “unpresentable.”

The Herodotus-historian advances by following his own *logos*, completes the itinerary of his discourse always using his own *logos* as guide. Is this not the most powerful means used by the Western historian, this imposed presence of the narrated past which legitimizes the historical operation? Is it not even more powerful than its own reality effect? The historian offers no alternatives, no field of possibilities or possible worlds, but rather a tribunal which rules according to what deserves being reported (a very important criterion of objectivity for Herodotus), according to what is worthy of being accomplished/experienced (to refer to Thucydides). The meaning the historian attributes to the past gives a meaning to present objectification by the reality effect. It is but a means of accrediting tribunal history which, via an account apparently detached from the present, rules on the meaning of life in society and its becoming.

The secularization of epistemology goes hand in hand with the affirmation of linear epistemology. Thus the seat of authority and the mechanisms for legitimating normality change. The time of history and of collective memory (culturally Judeo-Christian) provides the basis for the objectivization of the world, and thus for a new definition of alterity. It is no longer a question of including or translating the other in its subjectivity which characterizes Christian historiography. Western epistemology claims that it exclusively controls true knowledge, and thus is purportedly supported by the evidence of what exists and what has happened. Only such an epistemology is permitted to picture the future in terms of the present produced by the past in the right direction, the direction of progress.

Having confused secularization with de-Christianization, we assume that we are functioning within a culture that no longer owes anything to Christianity but its past, which has been assumed and surpassed. We contend with Sartre and Ngugi Wa Thiongo the error of this conviction. In response to a Freudian interpretation of a dream he considered a manifestation of *kjinns* (spirits),

3. François Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*, transl. Janet Lloyd (Berkeley, 1988).

Pattasha Dargah's *pir* (healer) asked Sudhir Kakar: "Is that how Christians interpret this problem?" Kakar, a Freudian psychoanalyst of Indian nationality, affirmed that it was purely a scientific analysis. The *pir* persisted: "But science is Christian."⁴

We arrive here at what we consider the key aspect of the intellectual culture which responded to the demands and battles for independence waged by diverse African societies during the three decades immediately following the Second World War. We refer to an intellectual process somehow comparable to the Enlightenment, although not at all its repetition. African intellectuals believed they were re-inventing a new literature as well as a new social science. Pierre Chaunu's comment about the West, for instance—"the State is at the origin of social science, a creation of the 18th century. . . . One cannot explain Enlightenment without the State"⁵—could just as easily be applied to black Africa of the 1950s and 1960s. If the metropolitan colonial State is at the root of a new social science, the new "independent" State is at the heart of a new social science. Between history and anthropology, the new social science re-creates society and State. It is thus not a question of removing the State from attempted explanations of Senghor's *négritude*, or of Nkrumah's *African Personality*, and so on. In fact, a re-invented State in Africa became the condition for a new social science. The theme of starting over, of a new beginning, is as prominent in the thoughts of intellectuals of this period as is a dual vision of time, of the world, and of society: tradition and modernity, past and present, ancestors and the living, and so forth. In black Africa, on the eve of independence, the Roman Catholic Church's Africanization outdistanced that of the colonial state, while the syncretic Christian phenomenon has not ceased to grow since the beginning of the century. Decolonization was thus not accompanied by de-Christianization, but rather by a certain secularization of the intellectual community and institutions.

On the intellectual plane in Africa, and especially with regard to epistemology, Christianity constituted the easiest and most glorious route for the revolutionary dream, which is as institutional as it is anarchistic. On March 6, 1957, during a speech marking the independence of the Gold Coast, Nkrumah spoke of the new era "leading us to the new Jerusalem, the golden city of our heart's desire." The promise made by many politicians of the first era to their future fellow citizens about "becoming white" is simply a reformulation of the Christian theme of resurrection. The choice of the name of Ghana, a kingdom on the edge of the desert that disappeared some thousand years ago, conjures up an image of a "New Jerusalem." Redemption and resurrection form the basis for other political choices such as the decision to change the name of the Congo to Zaïre, which refers to the first contact with Europe as well as to the initial Christianization, a decision that came in the midst of a crisis between the state

4. Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics, and Doctors* (New York, 1982).

5. Quoted by B. Barret-Kriegel, *Les historiens de la monarchie*. 4. *La République restaurée* (Paris, 1988), 1.

and the church. The theme of the Exodus is no stranger to revolutionary thought even in the West. For twentieth-century African intellectuals, scholarly and popular alike, the Scriptures constitute the required reference for a radical thought which quickly developed into a radical political theory. Lonsdale is correct in drawing attention to the biblical echo in Luthuli's *Let My People Go*. He also quotes Ngugi Wa Thiongo, who considered himself no more Christian than Sartre, but who nonetheless demonstrated a certain similarity to the philosopher when he made the lucid comment: "I cannot escape from the Church."

For a long time, the secularity that guaranteed our "scientificness" prevented us from understanding the Christian basis of twentieth-century African literate thought – that is, narrative writing. It is, however, the only period during which we can truly speak of an African thought which is universally explicit, systematic, and politically organized. In this sense, it marks a fundamental period for our understanding of the constitution and policies of historiography in Africa and the practices of historical discourses in Africa.

The history of the production of history in Africa is affected by the same syndrome as the history of societies. Before the 1960s, only "traditional," "pre-colonial" history is granted any real importance by Western Africanists. Apart from a few rare exceptions, only the "traditional," "oral" historian's work was considered worthy of a close study for its intellectual foundations. Only the time that could be inscribed in the ethnographic present was worthy of attention. Not too surprisingly, the question and the narrative of bourgeois Christianity are implicitly present in this construction of the essence of Africa, of a fundamental Africanness (a-temporal as an essence), of a sort of *homo africanus* ontology exemplified by Placide Tempels's *Bantu Philosophy*.

African literary construction of the historicity of human beings in Africa, as well as of their specific essence, is organized by several central factors: first, resurrection by returning to one's roots in Jerusalem, understood as a purification; second, a rupture between the original time of Africanism (*africanité*) and the time of African modernism (*modernité*); third, the central role of a socio-intellectual category of intermediaries, of quasi-apostles (not to say Messiahs) in the establishment of a link between these two temporalities; fourth, the role of the scientific construction of the historical narrative in order to re-establish this link; finally, the necessarily historical character of a collective consciousness. Thus a narrative identity becomes thinkable. It is constructed along the lines of linear time, and the resultant transformation of identity into an ethnicity which can only be read legitimately in a book whose model remains biblical, despite the fact that its concrete references are anthropological. In this manner, the new African historicity is built out from a radical, scientific, nominalist negation of time. Academic history claims to seize the true present in the past, just as "the dead seizes the living." The modern historical "operation" in Africa has been constructed upon Christian intellectual foundations, in the context and on the conscious base of the Western historical operation. Its epistemological bases have been deeply interiorized. They are believed to be

grounded in this narrative mode. Rather than hindering the conception that Africanism is different from Westernism, this context fosters precisely that notion. Indeed, it presents Africanism as a radical alternative to Westernization.

We can thus explain the paradox of Cheikh Anta Diop's philosophy which, while it presents itself as a radical alternative to the Hegelian exclusion of Africa from the history of humanity, constitutes a logical extension of Western thought and has its roots in nineteenth-century epistemology. The theme of pharaonic Egypt as the cradle of thinking humanity—and thus the proof of the black African origins of that same humanity—are found in a combatant French Catholic thought of the Age of Enlightenment and the French Revolution. According to Abbés Bonnard and Terrasson as well as other French intellectuals of the eighteenth century, while profane history is merely a “gross alteration” of sacred history, Egyptian history is closest to “the truth of our divine scriptures” and Egyptian civilization is greater than Greek. For Charles François Dupuis, all mythologies and religions can be traced back to Egypt; she reaches up to us with her religion, her morality, and her science.⁶ Similarly, it is in the monotheism of the Near East as well as in Hegel's writings that we discover the conception of an interrupted time, where the intrusion of evil (a foreign invasion, but also the sins of the elite accomplices to a slave trade) breaks the original equilibrium. In order to assure Africa's renaissance, redemption by an intellectual awareness, cultural purification, and especially the construction of a unitary state, are essential. The task of African intellectuals is to establish a direct link between a glorious past and a future, while bypassing the barbarism of foreign intrusion. For Diop, who was trained as a nuclear physicist, narrative accounts are no more than a means of building and feeding the historical conscience, of abolishing the time of the event and of ignoring a centuries long parenthesis. As Eco says, the intellectual who creates a performative situation “makes things with words.”⁷

Diop is not alone in having adopted this perspective of three eras (a glorious past, the colonial experience, the future), in which, in a narrative victory over time itself, the final era is the reincarnation of the first. Ki-Zerbo and Ade Ajayi, the most well-known African historians, independently from each other conceptualize the colonial parenthesis as a logical consequence of the “ethnographic present.” From almost immobile glorious traditions, one completely overlooks the colonial blemish and passes directly to the time of independence. In our view, the key to conceptualizing tradition in a specific manner (that is, in the ritual time of eternal repetition, of a social *perpetuum mobile*) resides in the category of the ancestors, that is the “glorious tradition.”

If this conception of historical time in Africa, perceived as a specifically African time, is explicit in the works of the historians quoted above, it is also present in contemporary African historiography in general. From the modes of production approach to Terence Ranger's vision of African initiative (adopted

6. Hartog, 309–347, and M. Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. Volume 1: *The Fabrication of Ancient Greece 1785–1985* (London, 1987), 173–188.

7. Eco, 267.

as the dominant theme in volume VII of UNESCO's *General History of Africa*) there are always two temporalities, two Africas—the Africa of tradition and the Africa of today. Historical narration and political leaders create the missing articulation, “release time,” and lead yesterday's genius (*le génie*), the very essence of Africanism, toward the construction of the future. In this manner, narration and historical construction support one another.

The result is a black hole, a huge omission which, by the very structure of suspended time, is excluded from history. It is as if institutions as well as intellectuals and political classes do their utmost to erase all memory of their time and place of origin—colonial Africa—in order to better solidify their legitimacy in the ethnographic present. This does not impact the major orientations of historiography alone, but also the ideologies, indeed, the mythologies, of current political systems. Those mythologies are grounded in Christian knowledge, whose major themes are shared by Islam, and which has spread even to the most remote village by way of the syncretic and brotherhood movements. Importantly, while this knowledge permits hierarchical political communication, it also excludes dialogue.

III

In this collective project we wish to rewrite this passion and its problems by establishing theoretical positions that rethink radically the practice of African history. We seek to question the politics of representation in Africa and to meditate on the concept of history and its manipulations vis-à-vis wills to truth.

This issue presents two main problems. The first concerns the promotion of the concept of African history; the second deals with the subtler issue of the politics of remembering and forgetting. Who is really responsible for these politics: the historian, the politician (who can and does, sometimes, impose views), or simply, as Michel Foucault used to claim, an intellectual configuration, an *episteme*? Indeed, it is difficult to define collective memory. Collective memory is not that of an organic group whose faculty of recall would be similar to the personal memory of an individual; rather, collective memory is a means of producing meanings which belong to a political field. Seen in this light, individual memory and collective memory are in dialogue. Collective memory does not signify facts about the past: it is above all a semantic code for retrieving memories, for making sense out of historical details in direct relation to political legitimacy. Recollection is neither an account nor a list, such as a genealogy, but a meaningful configuration of selected, negotiated events around “sites of memory,” or *lieux de mémoire*. While not necessarily producing an account, a site of memory—which might be, for instance, a hero, an image, a place—recollection organizes individual and collective memory, accords variable importance to events, especially to traumatic events, thus tying the past to the present in and for each person. In so doing, sites of memory construct a community, and dictate the categorical exclusion of those who do not participate in the recollection.

Against this collective memory, oral tradition is promoted and produced as an explicit discourse—for instance, a list, a narrative, or a court ceremony—which expresses a historical community. But memory pulls remembered experiences to itself and sets of connected memories, attracting and releasing details, dynamically affecting the structure of speech and performance behavior. Despite possible contradictions, however, none of the three ways in which society constructs meaning by articulating past and present—that is, memory, tradition, and history—effectively exclude one another.

In modern societies dominated by the paradigm of progress and modernization, however, written history is primary. Its legitimacy is intimately tied to that of the politics of the State as a means of establishing a significant relation between the past and the present. The work of memory is also present in its official genres of expression which interpret the past: written historiography, oral traditions, and, especially, the new genre of compiled writings, collections of oral traditions established by intellectuals belonging to a social group fighting to maintain or acquire the status of a politically recognized entity.

It is difficult to describe all the areas memory informs. It is also difficult to identify where significant traces of its activity might be found and where researchers could begin their investigations. In any case, one thing is clear: given that site, investigation would necessarily begin “in the other direction,” as historians must start with such signs in order to render past, present, and future processes intelligible. They must seek out the relationship, sometimes merely a potential relationship, between the social group as part of society, and a given area of memory. Of course, some areas are more accessible than others: in them, the presence of memory and its activities are more intense and thus easier to grasp. But all historical readings, one might rightly say, are a matter of construction. There is on the one hand each individual’s relationship with the past; on the other hand, there is something like the link between the creator of a production and those who appreciate the work, and this relationship is subjective. Nonetheless, it does convey the work of collective memory in its specific expression. Significantly, both areas—*invention* and the individual’s relationship with the past (as history and the practice of history)—have been the object of a great deal of research in African societies. The essays in this issue bear witness to this.

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