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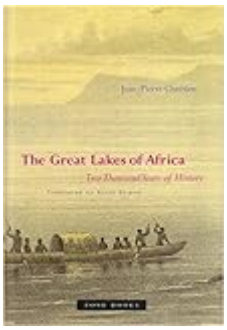

Jean-Pierre ChrÒ©tien. *The Great Lakes of Africa: Two Thousand Years of History.* New York: Zone Books, 2003. 504 pp. $36.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-890951-34-4.

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Published on H-Africa (May, 2004)

Going Deep into Great Lakes Regional History

At first glance, Jean-Pierre ChrÃ©tien's book looks like a longue-durÃ©e history because it spans at least two millennia. While ChrÃ©tien criticizes Fernand Braudel's indifference to Africa as a historical area, he indirectly invokes him in calling one section of the book a "social history of the long term" (p. 70). In another instance, he is direct about Braudel's influence. ChrÃ©tien says that his story of colonial economic change in Uganda's Buganda was done "in the spirit of Braudelian synthesis" (p. 239). Even with these allusions, though, ChrÃ©tien's book differs from Fernand Braudel's conception of history. Events and individuals count. Political ideologies are active in the historical narrative. Historical processes are not inscribed with that Braudelian sense of inevitablility.

Overall, ChrÃ©tien's capacious and ambitious history has two purposes. The first goal is to provide what is arguably the first time-deep history of the whole region. The second goal is to proffer an interpretation of the forces that led to the genocidal years in Rawanda that actually began in the late 1950s, but appeared most tragically in the 1980s-1990s and particularly in 1994. To do justice to the first goal, ChrÃ©tien resisted straitjacketing the region's past just to explain genocide. This allowed him to show when and how the region's ethnic composition took shape, and then how that composition was recast in some places into an ideology of "ethnic fundamentalism" (p. 37). The Braudelian model might have been suggestive to ChrÃ©tien as a narrative format. But it was not as suitable for stressing historical contingency, which he insists on.

One of the ways ChrÃ©tien keeps his history from galloping ahead to the 1980s-1990s is by avoiding the formula of the continuous linear stream. Early on, he states, "research on ... continuity, legitimate in all historical reflection, can become a trap if the question of discontinuities is not raised at every stage" (p. 17). He is loyal to that sentiment. Ending the book, over three hundred pages later, his penultimate sentence still stresses discontinuity: "the historian's skill is ... in reflecting on long-term processes and past ruptures and challenging fixed memories" (p. 357). He then adds, "Africa needs this pedagogical shift." By exemplifying his own advice, ChrÃ©tien's history avoids presentism. We get to savor the signifi-

cant early formative processes, many beginning before the Christian era.

The stage for this unfolding is a region geographically "on the cusp of East and Central Africa" (p. 22). The label "Great Lakes of Africa" arose out of the exploration literature, starting with Richard Burton's *The Lake Regions of Central Africa* (1860). Growing parallel to "Great Lakes of Africa" was "Interlacustrine Africa," designating a territory between Lake Victoria, Lakes Albert and Edward, and Lakes Kivu and Tanganyika. (Good maps show precisely the layout of states between the lakes.) Many previous studies focused on individual societies within the region, but just glanced at the whole area. When studies were comparative, they linked the kingdoms of Uganda or Rwanda with Burundi. By contrast, ChrÃ©tien takes on the histories of fourteen societies–mostly kingdoms–across four countries (Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and Tanzania). Of course, not all of these entities cross the stage at the same time and some have only a slight role. But he keeps us aware of how big the past stage was, and its diverse institutional performers. In his coda chapter this pays off, because he can explain why events in the 1990s occurred where they did and not in other interlacustrine societies.

The landscape for this history has been treated as real, but simultaneously as the basis of an imaginary geography. ChrÃ©tien defines the region as a distinctive swath of raised land, marked by massifs and heavy rainfall. By 1000 A.D., he says, "the region's countrysides began to look as they do now" (p. 44). A century ago, it had a substantial-to-dense population, supported by productive agriculture, fishing, cattle-keeping, and an advanced metallurgy. These features, combined with the impressive tiered monarchies presiding over the region, allowed the region to be transmuted into an image of a unique, coherent African pastorale.

European travel-writers first advanced this idea. Specifically, they assumed the coherence was created by African master races–history-generating groups that subdued and gained the loyalty of inferior Africans. African kingship foundational narratives provided episodes that overlapped with European ideas, and thus, European and African historical conceptions were often grafted together. ChrÃ©tien admits a coherence for the region, but quickly adds a cautionary note: "what is surprising is the persistence of profound internal conflict in such integrated countries" (p. 42).

Thousands of years ago is where ChrÃ©tien begins. This means revisiting, in chapter 1, many older arguments known mostly to specialists. Quite frankly, this could have become dry-as-dust in a less agile narrator's hands. However, ChrÃ©tien, best of all, is brisk. For instance, when discussing the region's early Bantu-speakers, he jettisons the hoary idea of "invasions," capitalizes on Jan Vansina's recent expansion speculations, but then proposes his own alliance model, stressing the resource mutuality of Bantu-speakers with other communities. Then he quickly caps it off with a larger point: "Bantu expansion" and "Hamitic invasions had less to do with African history and more to do with a particular European anthropology tainted by racial prejudice," by "notions of 'historic races' " (pp. 59-60). Once settlements were developing, agriculture took off, spurred by farming prowess and the infusion of crops from other African sources (sorghum, yams and tubers, finger millet), Asia (varieties of bananas), and later from American crops (maize, sweet potato, cassava, beans). Excavations at Uganda's Ntusi and Bigo show cattle-keeping also joined the mix.

Two synthetic chapters follow–chapter 2 on "The Emergence of Kingship" and chapter 3 on "The Formation of Monarchical States." His newer reading of early clanship systems in kingship formation is exciting. Even more fascinating is his idea that kingdoms' religious estates were not necessarily a buttress to kingship, as often assumed by pre-colonialists, but competed with kingship. The kingship was "the terrestrial medium." It was "up against the mediums of the beyond" (p. 138). In the seventeeth century, the monarchical states, that later so entranced European visitors with their organization, infrastructure, calibrated etiquettes, and loyalties, began their journey forward. Again, ChrÃ©tien intervenes with a cautionary note: "the idea that institutions suddenly sprang up one fine morning is the result of a totally anachronistic illusion" (p. 141). Monarchies grew most during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but often struggled to manage situations of drought, conflict, and "the control of space" (p. 142). In other words, kingdoms had struggled to arrive at the semblance of mastery that Europeans thought they saw.

By chapter 4, ChrÃ©tien is closing in on the final stages of his history. The moment he looks at is the arrival of colonialism, German in Tanganyika (until the end of World War I), succeeded by the British and Belgians in Burundi and Rwanda, and the British in Uganda. Local life changed significantly, with religion and the economy changing the most. While the monarchies shrewdly played their hand, particularly in Buganda, control shifted towards overlords' initiatives.

What stands out, though, in this moment, is the arrival of a "Gobineauian discourse" (p. 283). It came from many sources, from as far back as John Hanning Speke's 1860s mythical Hamites as the standard bearers of culture, and later from the "missionary characterology" (p. 283) that made Rwanda's Tutsi into "aristocratic Negroes" and the Hutu into "blacks so good, so simple, and so loyal." On this, ChrÃ©tien dryly remarks, "in short, Oriental Masters versus Aunt Jemima Negroes" (p. 283). Eventually, scholars would add their scientific *gravitas* to the discourse, beginning with C. G. Seligman's 1930 *Races of Africa* and its vision of Hamites bringing centralization to the region.

Here is where ChrÃ©tien's comparative perspective shines. He shows that Hamite ideology became marginalized in British Uganda by the 1950s, diminished by a more open colonial situation. However, in Rwanda, it continued to grow during the same period. This was true despite seminary student rebellions in the late 1950s that sought to elevate Rwandans, not ethnicities, as the premier national category.

Chapter 5 is entitled "Regained Independence and the Obsession with Genocide." As late as early 1959, ChrÃ©tien claims, "ethnic antagonism had not yet invaded people's consciences" (p. 303). But as 1959 ended, "thousands of huts were burned and several hundred Batutsi were killed ... and Hutu leaders were assassinated in retaliation" (p. 303). With the Hutu-based, racialized party, PARMEHUTU, winning the 1960 elections and Gregoire Kayibanda's 1961 coup, the Tutsi minority was suddenly on the defensive, toppled from its privileged position under colonialism. Thousands of Tutsis fled then, followed by thousands more in 1964 and 1973. By the 1980s, Batutsi refugees–"black Africa's first refugees"–numbered 700,000, spread among Burundi, Uganda, Zaire, and Tanzania. ChrÃ©tien goes further to show that the "binary majority-minority relationship" took root also in Burundi. By the 1990s, "an African racism" was at work in Rwanda and Burundi, often deceptively phrased in the language of majority rule, defending democracy, protecting autochthons from elite invaders, and populism (p. 317). The 1990s in Rwanda witnessed more venomous ideology, especially in the magazine *Kangura* (*The Awakening*), more ethnicized political alignments, and alas, state mobilization for killing (called "work").

As he closes, ChrÃ©tien is able to take us deep into the genocide without losing his analytical focus. He distinguishes between this genocide and the Holocaust. He says interrogations into the horror "are as complex as those for the Shoah." He adds Daniel de Lame's new idea about frustrations over the petit-bourgeoisie as an overlooked contributing cause. He says a fundamental cause was "the specificity of Rwanda-Urundi colonial experience" as a "closed-off, secluded environment." Here, elites were uniquely acculturated to a colonial discourse of ethnicity and race. "This mental confinement is ... key to the social pathology that produced the genocide" (pp. 334-335). In the end, he writes stirringly, "the region's historical challenge is to escape the ghettos that 'Africanist' discourse" has identified as past and future" and "redefine itself in contemporary Africa" (p. 356).

ChrÃ©tien has written an immensely successful book. It is not only an achievement for him, but a testament to the many talented researchers on whose work he depends, a fact he acknowledges. But an earlier theme about the control of space (pp. 142-144) that re-appears near the end might have been pursued more. Near the end, he writes, "indeed, historians must put contemporary events in a broader perspective ... [of] the long history of mastering the environment, political structuring, and managing contacts with foreigners" (p. 318). Did deep structures set up the fundamental tensions that were then deepened severely by ethnic clash and propaganda, triggering the genocides? More on this puzzle of causation would have been helpful.

While the book contributes greatly to Great Lakes history and the still-resonant world conversation on the 1994 genocide, it also sends a message about the intellectual perils that have attended the loss of pre-colonial times in today's African historical writing. These times, extrapolating from ChrÃ©tien, are essential to understanding the colonial and even the post-colonial eras. That long view is essential. But this book is not a brief for restoring pre-colonial historical practice as it was, but an illustration of what pre-colonialists need to do to modernize their field. ChrÃ©tien points the way.

Citation: Kennell Jackson. Review of ChrÖ©tien, Jean-Pierre, *The Great Lakes of Africa: Two Thousand Years of*

History. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9363