

# On Writing African History: Schools of Thought and their (Mis)Representation

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## Abstract

There are many different opinions on how to write African history properly. One US-American historian, J.E. Philips, recently opined his views quite dogmatically. In an article published in 2005 he compared the writing of African history in three countries – Japan, France, and the US. His comparison follows three premises: Firstly, US-historiography of Africa is the most progressive. Secondly, Japanese history writing on Africa, in contrast, is characterized by ignorance, falsity, and bad faith. Thirdly, Philips holds responsible for this allegedly bad state of the discipline in Japan the influence of the – allegedly anti-historical – French social anthropologists Georges Balandier and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Obviously, Philips` treatment of the distinct national schools of thought is polemical in style. What is worse, however, is the lack of expertise on the very topics he deals with. Ignorance is displayed by Philips throughout his article. The present contribution sets out to substantiate these points, for there is more to say in favour of French and Japanese ways of writing African history than the impertinent allegations of Philips forebode.

## Introduction

This essay is an expanded comment on an article which appeared under the heading “Perversion de l’Histoire” two years ago, written bei J.E. Philips (2005a), dealing with Japanese and French ways of studying African history. A volume about “Writing African History”, edited by Philips (2005b), was published almost at the same time. This second work tried to describe the

state of the art in African History and emphasised the necessity of interdisciplinarity for approaching this special field of study. In his review article for JAH, Thomas Spear, rightly concluded that “the central message of *Writing African History*, that historians need to become literate in the sources and disciplines they seek to use in order to be able critically to evaluate them, is a crucial one. While several of the articles do an excellent job in conveying such literacy, however, many do not [...]” (Spear 2006: 319)

According to another reviewer, Esperanza Brizuela-Garcia, Philips` own contributions to the book clearly belong to the less felicitous contributions. Regarding his introduction, she writes, “Professional historians and advanced graduate students will find little new in this piece [...]”, while concerning his concluding section her “main complaint is the lack of a more substantive conclusion.” (Brizuela-Garcia 2006: 1 and 4) A more substantial critique was launched by Terence Ranger (2006: 570f) who rightly pointed to a severe limitation and bias of Philips` *Writing African history*, namely its heavy reliance on North American and Nigerian scholarship alone, thereby excluding – and ignoring – various African as well as European branches of Africanist studies. Take those into account, and you will get a quite different picture of the state of the art.

One of the declared intention of the book was to set out rules and strategies which, according to the editor`s initial remarks, henceforth shall generally play the role of guiding principles for historical studies on Africa. Its goal, therefore, was to set the frame for further research. Given the competitive character of modern society (and parts of the academic world as well), no such agenda is proposed without material interests inspiring it. In case of J.E. Philips, this becomes especially clear in view of the first few pages of his article, itself a “Perversion de l`Histoire”, which will be critically examined in the course of the following pages.

If one calls an article »“Perversion de l`Histoire”: George [sic!] Balandier, his disciples, and African History in Japan«, as John Edward Philips has done in a recent contribution to the Journal *African and Asian Studies*, the potential readers might expect at least four things:

- to learn something about Georges Balandier, a still productive French sociologist and social anthropologist whose various contributions to the field of modern African Studies, carried out since the 1950ies, earned him renown not only in France but also internationally;

- to be presented with a detailed analysis of the connections and relationships between Georges Balandier and the Japanese authors in question;
- to be informed about Japanese African historiography – i.e. the writing of history as it is carried out in Japanese academia;
- to learn in the course of reading what exactly is meant by the obviously polemically phrasing “Perversion de l’histoire” which Philips attributes to Balandier, his Japanese students (who Philips unsympathetically calls “disciples”, thereby suggesting a lack of originality in their works) and Japanese African historiography in general.

None of these expectations is delivered by John Edward Philips. Instead, we are confronted with bitter prose and polemical attacks on various individual academics and scholarly traditions, French and Japanese.

### **Some general remarks**

There are several severe flaws in Philips’ paper which make me wonder why it has been published in the first place. Its poor quality seems obvious to me – being a historian and an “Africanist” dealing both with the *history of Africa* and the *history of writing African history* (funnily enough quite the same fields of interest Philips declares himself expert) – but, no less obviously, the journal editors either saw that differently or did not notice the flaws. Given the fact that *African and Asian Studies* 4 / 2 / 2005 was a special issue focusing on relationships of quite different sorts between Japan and Africa, the second possibility seems more likely to me. I guess that the (laudable) multiperspective concern might have been among the reasons for including Philips’ article.

In his introduction to the special issue, Seifudein Adem (2005: 441) rather noncommittantly summarizes Philips’ contribution: “John Edward Philips claims that the teaching of African history in Japan is underdeveloped, even distorted; he then looks at some of the possible reasons for this state of affairs.”<sup>1</sup> These few introductory notes, written in a quite distanced manner, rightly point out that Philips’ paper is based on a certain “claim”. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Two more summarizing statements allude to Philips’ vision of “benefits” to Africa and to the relationship between Japan and Africa resulting from “improved” teachings of African history in Japan (Adem 2005: 441; his own wordings are “beneficial” and “improvement”).

what they leave out, seems even more important to me. Philips does indeed claim “that the teaching of African history in Japan is underdeveloped, even distorted”, thereby constructing “this state of affairs”, as Adem writes ... but his diagnosis is by way of a claim and nothing but a claim. He hardly gives reasons for his opinion and, when he does, they are not tenable. This does not only account for his reasoning, even many of his “factual” claims are untenable.

Look, for instance, at pp.605ff, where Philips writes of “[t]he intellectual isolation of Japan”, without convincingly substantiating this stereotyped claim<sup>2</sup> but qualifying it instead as being “dangerous” not only for the further development of African historical studies in Japan but, by a hint on Japan’s significance within UNESCO (pp.605ff), for the whole world as well ... That such an active partaking of Japan in “world affairs” and in funding scientific research via UNESCO contradicts this claim of Japanese “isolation” and disinterestedness in foreign affairs even at the most superficial level,<sup>3</sup> does not spring to his mind who seems to be, on the one hand, deeply imbedded in the ethnocentric consciousness of an allegedly natural character of American hegemony, and, on the other hand, trapped by the egoistic fear of not getting enough funding for his own research projects. Although living and working in Japan, Philips draws an ignorant picture of Japan mainly relying on stereotypes. He does not only start with

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, he cites only two American studies to support his case: Significantly, both Brian McVeigh’s *Japanese Higher Education as Myth* (2002) and Ivan Hall’s *Cartels of the Mind* (1998), are obviously critically minded towards the Japanese system of higher education and therefore may give reason to discuss at least some of the arguments raised in the two studies. That such an interpretation is controversial should be clear to everyone, in any case to someone who, like Philips, has considered at least one of the opposite views, this time represented by Ezra Vogel’s *Japan as Number One* (1979) as well as “most Japanese” who do not or scarcely “realize how dysfunctional their universities are, especially in studying the world outside Japan”. (p.604/fn.3) However, what precisely “dysfunctional” should mean must remain an open question and is subject to considerable controversy both within and outside the academia. From a pragmatic point of view Japan’s university system seems to work reasonably well given that it produces sufficient numbers of qualified professionals, including internationally acclaimed researchers. Hence, it may well be that the “dysfunction” diagnosed by Philips results only from an ignorant outsider’s perspective ...

<sup>3</sup> Of course, the whole proposition is incorrect. See, for instance, Agbi (1992) for a discussion of the development of Japanese-African relations from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

the notorious “»Japan, Inc.«”-phrase (p.604) to allege the sheer materialism of “the” Japanese, but near the end of the article we read the following assertion:

“The lack of originality of Japanese, such an unfortunate stereotype, is not any innate characteristic of the Japanese people, it is something drilled into them by an educational system that rewards blind obedience.” (p.626)

What does that sentence mean? Philips tries to suggest to his readers two contradictory things about what he calls “lack of originality of Japanese”. First, he correctly calls it “an unfortunate stereotype” which implies – at least, in common sense usage – that it is incorrect and/or inadequate. However, within the same sentence, he goes on to assert its adequateness as a description of Japanese reality: “blind obedience”, he alleges, is real (after all not natural but nurtured<sup>4</sup>). Aside from the embarrassing contradiction in terms, compare this to a recently published, sober description of Japanese “conformism” and “nonconformity” which stems from a competent specialist in Japanese studies:

“To Western eyes, Japanese behavioural patterns often give the impression of formality, even stiffness. However, what seems stiff to the observer, is not necessarily what it means to the participant. Moreover, to hold order, conformity and harmony generally in high esteem, does not imply that nonconformity is absent.” (Coulmas 2005: 30f, my translation)<sup>5</sup>

Far from describing reality properly, the use of stereotypes in (foreign) cultural analysis prevents proper understanding and, what is worse, it helps to reinforce misunderstandings and to pass down prejudices to the broader

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<sup>4</sup> Obviously, this reference to education – which refers to the nature-nurture-debate in the simple minded way that believes in a clearcut frontier between “inborn” and “instilled” traits – serves Philips to distance himself from offensive racist ideas. Yet, regarding its alleged determinism, they have much in common (see, for a discussion of such parallels regarding Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza and Jared Diamond, Sonderegger 2004a: 131ff).

<sup>5</sup> The German original runs as follows: “Das Alltagsverhalten in Japan wirkt auf westliche Beobachter oft förmlich oder gar steif. Aber was dem Betrachtenden steif erscheint, braucht nicht unbedingt für den Beteiligten so zu sein. Auch bedeutet eine allgemein positive Haltung gegenüber Ordnung, Konformität und Harmonieorientierung nicht, dass es keine Nonkonformität gäbe.” (Coulmas 2005: 30f)

public. It should be self-evident for anyone working within the vast field of “area studies” – whether as a historian, an anthropologist or as anything else – to be conscious of that difficulty and, therefore, it should go without saying that avoiding stereotyped characterizations as far as possible is one of the most important pre-requisite of doing this kind of research.

Besides, that the peer reviewing (if there has been any) obviously failed in the case of Philips` paper is of a certain irony, given the fact that one of his recommendations to his Japanese colleagues practising area studies is as follows: they “[...] should try [...] to come up to an international standard by instituting blind peer review of publications [...].” (p.624) The “Western” arrogance inscribed in this short text passage is, unfortunately, typical for Philips` prose. While arrogance is not liable to prosecution in scholarly circles, unfounded and misleading incriminations have to be adressed by means of reasoning and must be critically assessed.

What is striking on behalf of Philips` article, is the persistent absence of any serious effort to argue about, or even to summarize correctly, the position and significance of the criticized and their works. Throughout the article, Philips replaces argumentation by an endless repetition of highly emotional and unproven accusations, culminating in an approved citation of a famous abolitionist New Year`s day “sermon” of 1831 (p.625). He himself points out the parallels between William Lloyd Garrison`s (1805-1879) radical statement –

“On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write, with moderation. No! no! [...] I will not equivocate – I will not excuse – I will not retreat a single inch – AND I WILL BE HEARD.” (Garrison 1831, cited on p.625)

– and his own state of mind. It signals no humble opinion to compare oneself to one of the US leading anti-slavery proponents of the the 19<sup>th</sup> century anyway. However, it seems clearly inappropriate with regard to the issues at stake in Philips` paper. Obviously, Philips is driven by a quite fundamentalist missionary zeal ... That may be intelligible regarding the resistance to slavery (as was the case with Garrison, a journalist and activist), but it is clearly disproportionate with regard to Philips` alleged concern to make a serious contribution to “our” historiographical knowledge. (And, by the way, any scholar has the duty to, at least, try to let his analysis be not affected by his personal motives.)

What is worse, the author not only shows a surprising unwillingness to carefully argue his case, but his article also reveals Philips' lack of knowledge, incompetence or intellectual sluttiness – the choice is yours –, even regarding his own fields of research, African History and African Historiography. An unbelievable incompetence relating to the basic historical method, *Quellenkritik* (the contextualizing critique of sources, which is preliminary to any historical research, regardless of the sort of sources used), is demonstrated by certain sections of Philips' article.

A precarious inability to interpret citations correctly, of which he was kind enough to give two examples (see pp.612f, 627), make Philips' discussion of the understanding of African History in the works of three Japanese "professors" (as he frequently labels them), of which he unfortunately gives only superficial sketches and no verbatim examples, scarcely trustworthy. While the "typical" reader – myself included – won't be enabled to verify or falsify Philips' accusations on the Japanese actors in his story, his incriminations against the French anthropological traditions of Georges Balandier as well as of Claude Lévi-Strauss (who is suddenly introduced into the text as a kindred spirit, despite the fact that their respective approaches – "dynamic anthropology" versus "structural anthropology" – are quite distinct) can be tested by any scholar who has minimal first-hand-acquaintance with the writings of these two authors or is willing to consult one of the numerous existing books on the history of anthropological thought.

### **Incompetency revisited ... the details**

The reader is not only disappointed regarding the four "expectations" raised by the article's title but not met by the text that follows. The actual content of the text is such to arouse an uncomfortable degree of irritation. Some of the points have already been mentioned. Now it is time to argue and illustrate them in a more concrete manner.

### **Balandiers negative "impact" on the study of African history in France**

Georges Balandier is presented as "the influential anthropologist" (p.608), who "delayed the development of African history there for several years" (p.610); that is it ...

No (written) source is given to support this latter claim which Philips seems to have obtained from hearsay only. In a footnote, he gives credit to Jan Vansina (the wellknown Belgian historian-anthropologist) and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, the *grande dame* of African Historical Studies in France, for “conversations” which made him understand (or misunderstand) “the early development of African history in France” (p.608/fn.7). At another point, he cites – of course, anonymously – “One European anthropologist” as a source for his alleged knowledge of French circumstances (p.615). Such infamous use of *fama* may be Philips’ personal understanding of “oral history”, but fortunately it does not correspond to the historians’ notion of oral history. And, happily enough, there are written contributions to the history of French African studies available as well, which, however, Philips chose to ignore completely.<sup>6</sup>

Let us take a look at the facts. Indeed, in course of the 1950ies, Georges Balandier – after spending some years after World War II in Guinea and Congo – happened to become an important figure for French studies on Africa (see Gaillard 2004: 296ff, 306ff). This was due to three main reasons. The first one is the impact of his writings, beginning with his doctoral theses *Sociologie des Brazzavilles Noires* and *Sociologie actuelle de l’Afrique Noire: Dynamiques des changements sociaux en Afrique Centrale* (1955), proceeded by *Afrique Ambiguë* (1957), *Anthropologie politique* (1969), *Anthropo-logiques* (1974) and numerous other books. Secondly, Balandier succeeded as a teacher, attracting numerous young students who were interested in “applied anthropology”, politics (decolonisation, independence), “Third

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<sup>6</sup> The only reference – with respect to the French tradition, namely Balandier – to a written source in Philips’ article is Jan Vansina’s *Living with Africa* (1994). Although Jan Vansina (\*1929) is a highly respected scholar in both fields, anthropology and African history, who produced numerous remarkable books in course of his career, his expertise on “French” anthropological and historical thought is limited by certain facts: Firstly, he was Belgian and got his professional education not in France but at London University and at the (Belgian) University of Louvain; therefore, he was shaped by quite different “traditions”. Secondly, starting in the 1950ies he worked for the *Institut pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale* (a Belgian semi-colonial research institution, quite similar to the French ORSTOM and IFAN programmes where Balandier was engaged after World War II), thereby being able to carry out fieldwork which eventually resulted in his PhD thesis and subsequently his famous book *De la tradition orale: Essai de méthodologie historique* (1961). Thereafter, Vansina moved to the US soon, hence adopting still other approaches to research in African history (see Gaillard 2004: 213, Vansina 1994: 27ff, 2001).



World”<sup>7</sup> countries ... and history – many of whom were far from being – or staying for long – passive adherents of Balandier’s approach.<sup>8</sup> This approach, “[...] a new Africanism, which began as a sort of colonial sociology or colonial ethnology and subsequently became an anthropology of colonial independence and then a dynamic anthropology” (Gaillard 2004: 293), may have had several defects, but an antihistorical attitude is not among them. Quite the contrary is true. As Frederick Cooper puts it,

“[...] colonialism in the sense that Balandier’s [1951] article delineated it: as a relationship of power, deriving from a particular history and with profound but complex social, economic, political, and cultural meanings. [...] Equally important was his historical sensibility: colonization was a historically specific process, and the crisis of the postwar moment exposed [– in Balandier’s own words –] »the totality of relationships between colonial peoples and colonial powers and between the cultures of each of them ... when the antagonism and the gulf between a colonial people and a colonial power are at their maximum.«” (Cooper 2005: 34-35; my emphasis, A.S.)

Thirdly, Balandier’s academic career developed rapidly and so did the opportunities for students of African societies. The *Centre d’études africaines* was founded by Balandier in 1958, followed by the implementation of the journal *Cahiers d’études africaines* in 1960. This journal did not exclude historical contributions. Far from it. Certain historical issues were treated from the very beginning. Already number 7 of CEA was entirely devoted to African history: *Pour une histoire de l’Afrique Noire*, was the historian Henri Brunschwig’s programmatic title for his editorial (1963).<sup>9</sup>

Surely, as this seems to be the entire motivation of Philips to attack Balandier, Georges Balandier had sought to secure research funds for the

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this term was coined by Balandier himself, together with A. Sauvy, in the mid-50ies: *Tiers-Monde: Sous-développement et développement* (1956) (see Rivière 2004: 105).

<sup>8</sup> Among many others, Claude Meillassoux, an “anthropologist” who contributed immensely to our knowledge about various topics in West African history: works on “trade” (1971), “slavery” (1986), etc.

<sup>9</sup> See the website of *Cahiers d’études africaines* for contents and summaries: <http://etudesaficaines.revues.org>, 04.03.2006. Isn’t it funny, by the way, that in the same number 7 of CEA (1963) even Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch who is – probably misleadingly – quoted by Philips as one of his main “oral sources” about French African studies, is represented with one of her articles?

kind of studies he wanted to carry out – which were anthropological and sociological in character, focused on contemporary history. However, on what ground can he, or anybody else who is a scientist or scholar, be accused of creating the facilities and improving the opportunities for one's research? There is even less reason in such an accusation as *Cahiers d'études africaines*, which was launched by Balandier, was not restricted to synchronic "anthropological" writings but published a wide range of historical articles as well.

Yet, the claim that Balandier's activities had "delayed the development of African history there for several years" (p.610) is not only absurd with regard to the individual attacked<sup>10</sup> but also erroneous as a matter of fact. African history did quite well in France and produced some works of merit even in the early days of "postcolonial" historiography. Jean Suret-Canale's marxist *Afrique Noire Occidentale et Centrale: Géographie, Civilisations, Histoire* appeared in a first edition in 1958 (Suret-Canale 1973). In Robert and Marianne Cornevin's *Histoire de l'Afrique* of 1964 one can still find certain colonialist flaws, yet the difference in attitude towards African history is striking if one compares this edition with the first published version of the book (Cornevin 1956). Also, from early on, Yves Person, who is still well remembered for his monumental masterpiece on the "revolutionary" Samori (1968-1975), helped to raise the quality of historical thought about Africa in France ... and to leave behind "colonial historiography".

Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch's career started under these same changing and challenging circumstances of decolonization and early independence where there came into being a lot of new opportunities for historians who wanted to do research in Africa. She wrote numerous articles about those changing trends in French African studies since the 1960ies (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1976, 1997, 2001, Coquery-Vidrovitch/Jewsiewicki 1986), none of which Philips seems to have found useful to look at. In her booklength *Afrique Noire: Permanences et ruptures* she credits the already mentioned Henri Brunschwig as one of the "maîtres qui m'ont appris l'Histoire" (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1985: 7). At least, she – one of the alleged oral sources, Philips draws on to support his claims – is conscious of the fact that a serious French "tradition" of historical African studies was already emerging in the 1950ies.

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<sup>10</sup> Compare also Cooper (2005: 37ff).

Philips titled his paper “perversion de l’histoire” and subsumed under this heading Balandier’s alleged antihistorical standing as well as the, equally alleged, antihistorism of the Japanese authors he sets out to attack. How come? – A reading of pp.608ff is instructive. There Philips correctly summarizes one point made by Balandier as early as 1951, namely that anthropologists have to develop a “understanding of history” (p.608). What is not mentioned by Philips, but what is clearly the point of Balandier’s argument, is the purpose intended: anthropologists must develop a certain sense for history, so Balandier’s argument runs, to be able to interpret their synchronic data adequately. Without knowledge of the recent past there will be no adequate knowledge of the immediate present.

From the fact that, as he puts it, Balandier did not explicitly mention “[...] that colonized peoples, the traditional [sic!] subjects of European anthropology [sic!]<sup>11</sup>, had histories of their own” (p.608), he thinks to be allowed to conclude that Balandier believes they had none, except for “the form of European colonialism” (p.608). However, absence of a peculiar *dictum* does not necessarily indicate the opposite. On the next page Philips, for one time, seems to have recognised the weakness of his affirmation, for he then qualifies that “Balandier came to think that, although Africans might have had history, the history of Africa could be written only by anthropologists, not historians.” (p.609) The only “source” given for this “adjustment” of his undue “argument” is the probably misinterpreted Jan Vansina (see p.609/fn.10).

Philips does not, as he felt obliged to write, “[...] intend to do a complete study of the development of Professor Balandier’s thought” (p.609). That would not have been necessary anyway. Sufficient would have been any careful reading of at least *one* text of Balandier, together with the second usual practice among serious historians: contextualisation.

When Balandier argued in 1951 that it is important for anthropologists – who, as should be remembered, were until then almost universally used to work among small, rural communities, most of them either interested in the “primitive” beginnings of humankind (diffusionist and evolutionist schools of thought) or avoiding the diachronic perspective altogether (structural functionalism) – , to integrate a specific historical perspective into their agenda, that was no small “revolution” in (French) anthropological thought.

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<sup>11</sup> For more nuanced and more competent discussions of the relationship between anthropology and colonialism, see Moore (1994), Goody (1995), Stocking (1995).

Of course, “applied” anthropologists who, in the 1950ies, were going to do fieldwork on contemporary topics as intended by Balandier, had to learn “colonial” history first and foremost. Colonialism still reigned and dominated the lives not only of the colonized but of the colonizers as well. And the formative impact of colonialism did not end suddenly, neither with the “year of independence” nor later ...

### **Two“opponents” of history and/or of historians: Balandier and Lévi-Strauss**

According to Philips, saying that Africans have no history of their own is almost the same as saying African history can solely be studied by anthropologists ... at least in the case of Georges Balandier (pp.608f). “[T]he history of Africa could be written only by anthropologists, not historians.” (p.609) That is the way, Philips presents Balandier’s position towards African history and historiography. As we have already shown, this presentation is both unsound in logical argument and contradictory with regard to well established facts.

However, there is one more slander error in Philips ascriptions, this time at the cost of another, even more important French scholar: Claude Lévi-Strauss. “[...] [U]nless his fellow anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss [sic!]", Philips tells us, “he [i.e. Balandier] was not opposed to history *per se*, only to historians studying Africa.” (p.609) If there comes a new enemy along who shall be beaten, Philips is readily willing to forget not alone what he has written a few lines before – remember his defunct demonstration of the alleged “development” of Balandier’s thought – but also that, as a scholar, you are obliged to check your claims by considering the available data (that may support one’s own opinion but may also contradict it). Philips does not even think of the slightest need to make this test with regard to Lévi-Strauss’s understanding of history.

It is true that Lévi-Strauss has never tried to write history (in the common sense of that term) and that analysis à la *anthropologie structurale* rests on a synchronically executed method but, as both his own comments on history respectively anthropology and the writings of historians like Fernand Braudel clearly show (see, for instance, Lévi-Strauss 1997, 2004, Braudel 1992, 1997), he was by no means “against” history. The great historian

Fernand Braudel grasped this as early as 1958 when, in his famous article *Histoire et sciences sociales. La longue durée*, he wrote:

“There is a general crisis of the human sciences. [...] Here they are [i.e. the different branches of the human sciences], in conflicting disagreement about the respective limits of their fields of interest, for each of them dreams of maintaining or restoring self-sufficiency. Only some scholars strive towards their rapprochement: Claude Lévi-Strauss, for instance [in *L'Anthropologie structurale*. Paris: Plon, 1958], tries to acquaint his “structural” anthropology with the methods of linguistics, with the horizons of the “unconscious” history and with the juvenile imperialism of “qualitative” mathematics. He aims at a science which ties together [...] anthropology, political economy, linguistics, etc. However, who is ready for this frontier crossing and for this restructuring?” (Braudel 1997: 149f, my translation, A.S.)<sup>12</sup>

Lévi-Strauss was and still is neither “opposed” to history nor to historians. The philosopher-anthropologist who is interested in the deep structures of the “Human Mind” deals with different problems than academic “history”.<sup>13</sup> Historiography is simply not his profession, *ce n'est pas son métier* ...

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<sup>12</sup> “Il y a crise générale des sciences de l'homme: [...] Les voilà, à l'envi, engagées dans les chicanes sur les frontières qui les séparent, ou ne les séparent pas, ou les séparent mal des sciences voisines. Car chacune rêve, en fait, de rester ou de retourner chez elle... Quelques savants isolés organisent des rapprochements: Claude Lévi-Strauss[...] pousse l'anthropologie «structurale» vers les procédés de la linguistique, les horizons de l'histoire «inconsciente» et l'impérialisme juvénile des mathématiques «qualitatives». Il tend vers une science qui lierait, sous le nom de *science de la communication*, l'anthropologie, l'économie politique, la linguistique... Mais qui est prêt à ces franchissements de frontière et à ces regroupements?” (Braudel 1997: 149f; a German version is Braudel 1992: 49f) Of course, Braudel's ideal of the relationship between the “human sciences” was different from Lévi-Strauss' in many aspects, notably with regard to the different roles they ascribed to “history”, ie. the academic discipline, in such an interdisciplinary frame. However, it is a fact – here clearly confirmed by Braudel's assessment – that Lévi-Strauss was not opposed to “history *per se*” (p.609).

<sup>13</sup> His approach, however, was – and still is – of interest to historians who are conscious of the fact that there are different notions of time (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1997: 282ff, 2004). Listen again to Braudel's words on “la longue durée” and the intended seminal relationship between the human sciences: “Des expériences et tentatives récentes de l'histoire, se dégage – consciente ou non, acceptée ou non – une notion de plus en plus précise de la multiplicité du temps et de la valeur exceptionnelle du temps long. Cette dernière notion,

When Philips points out that Balandier – and in a misfitting analogy he includes Lévi-Strauss as well – “[...] seems not to have considered seriously [sic!] the idea that disciplinary training in history could have validity for the study of African history” (p.609), Philips gets near to an interesting point, but his childish ideas about anthropology as a discipline and about disciplinary domains in general (pp.609ff) bar him from grasping both Balandier’s then wellfounded reasons for such an opinion and a sober understanding of the productive connections between history and anthropology (starting not, to an appreciable extent, before the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; see, for instance, Bentley 1997, Burke 1989, 2005).

Although the journal *Annales* which fostered interdisciplinary approaches was founded as early as 1929, the *Annales* only began to have a deep impact on French historiography after World War II – only after their outstanding representatives were appointed to metropolitan chairs and to leading positions in research facilities. If the English “biographer” of this school of thought, Peter Burke (2004: 122f), is to believe – as we have much more reason to do than in case of Philips’ imaginary “his-story” of historiography (see pp.612ff) – Africa is still a vast and unworked field as regards the broad-minded and interdisciplinary historiographic research of historians rooted in the *Annales* tradition.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, as we have already indicated, there are – and have been already 50 years ago – a lot of sincere historians of Africa in France, old ones as well as young ones.

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plus que l’histoire elle-même – l’histoire aux cent visages –, devrait intéresser les sciences sociales, nos voisines.” (Braudel 1997: 151)

<sup>14</sup> This is not contradicted by Henri Brunschwig’s having been a student of Marc Bloch, for Brunschwig’s works on French imperialism show almost none of the typical signs of the *Annales* tradition. Peter Burke (2004: 123) explains this fact by the following consideration: “Obgleich Henri Brunschwig, ein ehemaliger Bloch-Schüler, einer der bedeutendsten Historiker von Kolonialafrika wurde, ist seine Arbeit über den französischen Imperialismus kaum beeinflusst von der *Annales*, sicher deswegen, weil dieses Modell für seine Beschäftigung mit der jüngeren Vergangenheit und mit relativ kurzfristigen Entwicklungen (1871-1914) wohl ungeeignet erschien.” Therefore, it seems to be quite unfounded to declare, as Jan Vansina (1978: 352) did nearly thirty years ago, “[...] that Brunschwig is also a member of the school of the *Annales* as well as a historian of Africa.” What Philips still has to learn is that a historian may not content himself with looking solely at the surface but that he has to read contents carefully and to situate them in the right context. Otherwise, his dealing with history is simply anachronistic – one of the most blameworthy errors a historian can make.

### The “evidence” that makes Balandier the mastermind behind three Japanese Africanists

With regard to the relationship between Balandier and three of his Japanese graduate students, no information is given except that he was the supervisor of their doctoral theses (pp.610f, 615f). Together with the imaginary anti- or a-historism of Balandier and the fact that these former students and meanwhile Professors at various Japanese universities have specialized in the study of “letterless” societies in the Niger bend, is reason enough for Philips to characterize them stereotypically in the following ways:

- They “lack”, he says, “originality”, an allegedly typical trait of the Japanese “drilled into them by an educational system that rewards blind obedience” (p.626). However, they are able to be “drilled” by a French “master” like Balandier as well ...
- They are “obedient” followers and executors of a wrong path: “As all good disciples of Georges Balandier know, historians have no business studying Africa, the reserved domain of anthropologists.” (p.616)
- One of them, Junzo Kawada, is even credited explicitly with “Kawada’s campaign against historians working in African studies” (p.613); of course, neither does Philips give a source for this assessment nor does he offer a description how Kawada is campaigning “against” historians. But he and his colleagues are – by way of association but not of demonstration – established as sort of militant crusaders ... crusading not only against historians of a certain temper but against “African history” in general.
- At one point, Philips calls one of Balandier’s former students a racist, but only half-heartedly: “This is not to say that Kawada is *necessarily* a racist.” (p.620, my emphasis); again without giving a source for this verdict except for his own personal, more than dubious “expertise”: “The presence or absence of history in a society, in the view of Balandier’s disciples in Japan, is purely a matter of race. Black Africans have no history, whether they write or not. Other peoples do have history, whether they write or not.” (p.620) This is a serious accusation. Where is the evidence?

### “Three and a half” Japanese Africanists and African History in Japan

Philips` main target is Junzo Kawada (born 1934) who graduated from the *School of Arts and Science* in the University of Tokyo, later received a doctorate in ethnology from the Sorbonne.<sup>15</sup> We are neither told when exactly this training happened nor for how long it lasted, but that it has had a deep and enduring impact on Kawada is *nolens volens* suggested. No convincing evidence is given by Philips to prove this. At least, he informs us that Kawada`s research on the Mossi`s political system resulted in a doctoral thesis supervised by Balandier in 1971. Although Kawada “used oral traditions as data on the Mossi past” (p.610), he, together with his two colleagues Yoshihito Shimada and Soichiro Takezawa, is presented as just “another scholar who insists that written documents (and therefore history) have no role to play in our understanding of African societies.” (p.615) What these Japanese scholars obviously – i.e. obvious to every neutral observer – might indeed insist, is that those historians who are solely used to work with written documentaries are not well-equipped to do research on the history of certain African societies where written sources are scarce or lacking.<sup>16</sup> If this is what they mean, then that is not only a perfectly reasonable statement but also in accordance with the facts.

There are indications even in Philips` “summaries” of some texts of these Japanese authors which sustain my interpretation. Kawada`s article *Afurikashi e no kokoromi* – which may be translated, according to common usage, either as *An Introduction to African History* or as *An Essay on African History*, but is translated by Philips as “African History: a Tentative Sketch” (p.611) as well as (much more misleadingly) “an experiment towards African history” (p.611/fn.16)<sup>17</sup> – appeared in 1962, therefore not unlikely

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<sup>15</sup> This very basic personal information about Kawada – year of birth, early academic training – stems not from Philips` account who is silent about the life histories of his “enemies”, but from the *Biohistory journal* which, in winter 2004, published a short “Dialogue/Narration” between Junzo Kawada and Keiko Nakamura; see <http://www.brh.co.jp/en/experience/journal/43/dialogue.html>, 06.03.2006.

<sup>16</sup> This does neither imply, as Philips continuously alleges, that all historians use solely written documents as sources nor that there are no written sources on all parts of Africa and for all times of African history ...

<sup>17</sup> There is another example where Philips uses unfair methods by way of translation. In a footnote relating to Kawada`s book *Mumoji Shakai no Rekishi* (1976) which he correctly translates as “the history of a letterless society” (p.610), we read the following commentary: “It is only fair to mention that *mumoji* is not the usual pejorative term for



from a time even before (!) Kazawa studied under Balandier's guidance. Be that as it may. In this article, Kazawa mentioned three difficulties regarding research into Africa's history: the difficulty of prehistorical and archaeological sources; the absence of written sources for most parts of the continent; the difficulty to correlate prehistorical and ethnographic data (p.611). These difficulties were real in the 1960ies, and they have lost nothing of their relevance today, in the case one deals with archeological, prehistorical, paleoanthropological issues or studies the history of societies where writing was formerly absent (which happen to be, not so surprisingly, the interests of Junzo Kawada up to today<sup>18</sup>).

"Kawada went on to say that he considered it important to study the history of Africa" (p.611), Philips tells us next. However, "[h]e argued that ethnology and linguistics could reveal the most about Africa's history, and that history as a discipline had no role to play in the reconstruction of Africa's past. He based this curious conclusion on the argument [...] that historians could only use written records." (p.612) If one keeps in mind the then current instruction courses in historiographical method as well as the dominant modes of operation in historical research up to the present time, then such a conclusion will seem much less "curious".<sup>19</sup>

Kawada's article of 1962 gave a quite traditional sketch of African history, seen as a result of foreign intrusion and native reaction (p.611). Such a

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illiterate, *monmo*." (p.610/fn.13) This statement has two implications: first, that *monmo* is a pejorative term *per se*; second, that *mumoji*, although not as "bad" as *monmo*, has a pejorative meaning. Both is wrong. *Mumoji* has no other meaning than that there, i.e. in certain communities, used to be no script and no skills of writing. *Monmo*, on the other hand, means illiterate, i.e. a person who cannot write and/or read, although he is living within a society where writing is common practice. Neither of the two words is, as Philips says, "the usual pejorative Japanese term for illiterate" (my emphasis), although there may be some individuals out there (and not alone in Japan) who cannot help but associate illiteracy with stupidity. According to my Japanese wife, Junko Sonderegger, the "usual" understanding of the term *monmo* among Japanese is quite different. Her contextual translation of *monmo*'s meaning runs as follows: "unfortunately, he [*monmo*, the illiterate person] has not had the opportunity to learn to write."

<sup>18</sup> See again *Biological journal* 2004,

<http://www.brh.co.jp/en/experience/journal/43/dialogue.html>, 06.03.2006.

<sup>19</sup> To hold that „[t]he assumption that historians only work with written documents is a strange idea to most historians, but common among people who are not historians" (p.612) is not only wrong with regard to the period before the 1960ies. Working with written sources is still the daily bread of almost every historian ...

picture is indeed quite inadequate, but it was the “state of the art” of accepted historical “knowledge” in 1962, when Kawada’s article appeared. Remember that the doyen of anglophone “postcolonial” African historiography, Roland Oliver, delivered his inaugural lecture at the *School of Oriental and African Studies* in London not before spring 1964. Remember that Edith R. Sanders’ influential refutation of the “Hamitic hypothesis” did only appear in 1969. It is therefore quite unfair to criticize someone, as Philips indeed does, on the ground of knowledge which was not available at the time (or which to think of, in any case, would have afforded an intellectual and moral strength that cannot be expected of everyone).

If Kawada changed his mind or not in the course of time, i.e. his notion of African history, cannot be decided on the basis of the evidence provided by Philips. Although he refers to “a brief article he [Kawada] wrote for a popular world history journal” in 1990 (p.615), Philips does not discuss it. The only thing he has to comment critically is that Kawada mistook “the son-in-law of Usuman Danfodio’s son, Muhammad Bello”, al-Hajj Umar, for “the son-in-law of [...] Usuman Danfodio” (p.615). Such a mistake is, of course, unfortunate, but to point at it in the manner Philips does is a bit pitty-minded and, as the single mentioned argument against this article, very poor. However, as Philips kindly demonstrates a few pages later, you can still boost the absurdity of your argument. On p.620, immediately after he had called Kawada sort of a racist, he writes:

“[...] his animus towards history seems to extend beyond Africa, although his power to influence Japanese academia does not.<sup>20</sup> Kawada is well known in Japan for having invited Professor Claude Levi-Strauss [sic!] to Japan and for having interviewed him on national television during his visit.[...] Professor Levi-Strauss’s [sic!] antipathy to history is well known, and is often reciprocated by historians.[...] That Professor Kawada sees him as such an important scholar suggests that he is really interested in attacking history, but that African history [...] is the only history he has the power to prevent in Japan.” (p.620)

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<sup>20</sup> A very remarkable sentence, in view of the tenor of his article which continually repeats how influential Kawada and his fellows are...and how dangerous they are...and, anyway, blocking African history in Japan ...

Any commentary on this haphazardly mix of allegations, falsities and inconsistencies would be superfluous, I guess, a waste of time.

Regarding the two other Japanese authors Philips attacks, even the absolute minimum of exact information about the nature of their links to Balandier is missing. Yoshihito Shimada is mentioned to have written a thesis on "the Lamidat of Rey Bouba, a sub-emirate of Adamawa in the Sokoto Caliphate" (p.615), yet no bibliographical reference is given, no title of the thesis, no year of completion, let alone parts of its content. Nothing at all is said in this respect about the third "disciple" of Balandier, Soichiro Takezawa.

However, both of them are aggressively criticized by Philips due to what he calls "the Takezawa-Shimada debate" (p.616) which "took place in the pages of the official journal of the Japan Association for African Studies, *Afrika Kenkyu*" in 1988 (p.616) and "continued for several more issues of *Afrika Kenkyu*" (p.618). The issue at stake was islamization in West Africa and the use or uselessness of John Spencer Trimingham's approaches used in *Islam in Africa* (1959) and *History of Islam in West Africa* (1962). According to Philips, Takezawa should not have consulted the recent literature on Islam in Africa in order to "[...] come to the not-so-startling conclusion that Trimingham's work was out of date, had been superceded, and had overestimated the role of violence in contrast to that of peaceful conversion in explaining the spread of Islam in West Africa." (p.616) Is such a critique not beneath contempt? Why should it be of no value to re-read and re-evaluate former literature from time to time?

Takezawa as well as Yoshihito Shimada are also criticized by Philips on the dullest level. "From his citations it is clear that Mr. Takezawa cannot read Arabic," says Philips (who is a native-speaker of English), "but he also demonstrates, to all familiar with the historiography of Islam in Africa, that he cannot read English either." (p.617) Of course, any proof is left out, but topped by a new aggressive claim, this time towards Shimada: "Once again a Japanese academic advertised his failure to read even the secondary sources in English, thus basing the central thesis of his article on a major factual error." (p.617)

Philips means thereby Shimada's critique "[...] that Trimingham had neglected the Fulani ethnic factor in the »Fulani« jihads." (p.617), although Philips holds that, "If I were to photocopy every page on which Trimingham mentioned the Fulani ethnic factor in the West African jihads I would have a heavy pile of paper." (p.617) Subsequently he quotes one

example taken from Trimingham's *A History of Islam in West Africa*. Ironically, Shimada seems mainly to rely not on this book but on *Islam in West Africa* which was published three years earlier and showed quite a distinct approach: "Shimada pointed out that Trimingham had in fact written [...] *Islam in West Africa* [...], which was not at all historical and which therefore could not be accused of having had a (shudder) historical perspective." (p.617) So, I may ask who is, in fact, the one who cannot read carefully, think logically and write down comprehensible English sentences?<sup>21</sup>

It seems necessary to remind individuals tarred with the same brush as Philips that better language skills do not necessarily coincide with greater clarity of ideas. Towards the end of his paper, Philips gives again evidence that his mastery of English, his mother-tongue, does not help him from completely misunderstanding a short text passage written in English by Chizuko Tominaga. Her paragraph runs as follows:

"What makes up history for people in an unlettered society is an accumulation of memories, an oral history that is indispensable to their perpetuation as a people. Each ethnic group has its own accumulation of memories, which is a representation of their culture and the source of their identity. Independent states in Africa are busy forcing ethnic groups to abandon their memories, considering to be insignificant for the construction of a modern society, and to be interfering with modernization by preserving a tribal mentality." (Tominaga 1999, cited on p.627, one paragraph introduced AS)

What Chizuko Tominaga is saying – obviously to anyone acquainted with the reality and historiographical record (you can add the anthropological and sociological literature as well) of the last few decades – is, first, that in many parts of Africa there are in use at least two different kinds of history. On the one hand, the history of the people ("memories"), on the other hand, the history of the state. Secondly, she points out correctly that these both are rival histories, at least in the contemporary situation when African "nation-states" try to maintain (or in some parts, to re-establish) their power by way

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<sup>21</sup> As far as can be supposed by the fragmentary informations provided by Philips, Shimada simply objected to Takezawa's saying that Trimingham followed a historical perspective, while Philips likes to call it an anthropological perspective. Shimada disagrees with both of these (equally simple-minded, as I would like to add) alternatives.

of “historical” education. We should not forget how important history as a discipline was – and still is – as a means to shape consciousness ... also, of course, false consciousness.

Philips interpretation of Tominaga’s paragraph is strikingly different and ... utterly wrong:

“Here we see compounded several different, unquestioned Japanese assumptions that have made it so hard for Japanese to understand the outside world. These are the assumptions that history is the official propaganda of nation states,<sup>22</sup> that nations are, or should be, synonymous with ethnic groups, and that memories and traditions can never be held in common across ethnic boundaries,<sup>23</sup> which assumptions are axiomatic in Japan.” (p.627)

Regarding Japanese African History in general, Philips reiterates again and again that it is entirely absent (pp.604f) and has been “blocked” by Balandier’s students (p.610). However, his own data contradicts this claim.

- Once, he states that there are certain competent historians in Japan who are studying African History from an economical (pp.604, 623) and political perspective (p.623). Is this not part of African history as well?
- Then, he cites some of the books and articles of the attacked Japanese anthropologists bearing “African history” even in their titles (!) (pp.611f, 615).

It seems indeed absurd to conclude from this the “absence” of African History as Philips does. All that a less biased commentator can deduce from the evidence provided is that *the kind of historical writing propagated by Philips is absent in Japan* (or maybe, as he heavily relies on hearsay information without checking it by comparing it to written documentary sources, that its existence has not reached his earshot yet).

What kind of “African history” is Philips’ concern? As far as I am able to judge from his paper in question, it is about a highly arbitrarily writing of “his-story” of Africa, about an unsound attempt to fit Africa into the narrow frame of an ideologically distorted world view. He himself gives the clue to

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<sup>22</sup> Note that Tominaga did not write anything similar to this. History, according to her paragraph, is both the “memories” of living communities and the “modernization” process.

<sup>23</sup> Note again that none of these allegations can be deduced from the paragraph quoted.

an understanding of his notion of scholarship, which seems to lie at the base of his approach. Cautiously phrased, but approvingly quoting Keith Thomas, Philips writes: "If it is true that »Modern scholarship is a highly competitive activity and the intellectual dominance of any writer never goes unchallenged for long.«<sup>[...]</sup> then Japanese scholarship seems to remain pre-modern." (p.610) What else is this than "social darwinism" translated to the field of scholarship? In fact, research findings, given that they are well grounded and well argued, still pass the test of time ... and the test of careful scholars.

### **Some further examples of incorrect interpretation, lack of knowledge and/or of seriousness**

Philips asserts that "[t]he assumption that historians only work with written documents is a strange idea" (p.612). He then suggests that historians of all times have mainly relied on non-written sources. As a matter of fact, this suggestion is wrong, at least, if we speak about "modern" historiography (i.e. its institutionalized forms in universities) since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (see, for instance, Bentley 1997). Leopold von Ranke's "revolution" in historical approach was indeed his pointing out the importance of doing *quellenkritisch* archival work. And in the long run and for the dominant forms of historical research, this had indeed the effect – on behalf of the majority of historians worldwide – to work mainly and, in some cases, exclusively with written sources. That this narrowed focus on written documentary was challenged by some professional historians at any time is correct, but their's was not the majority. By the way, that the works of those challenging historians may have passed the test of time best does not demonstrate that they were believed to be the best in their own times. This important difference, substantial to any serious understanding of what history and historiography are, is ignored by Philips all the while.

Ignorance, however, and making unfounded assertions are not the only negative characteristics Philips continuously demonstrates in his paper. Indeed, he seems incapable of reading and interpreting written texts correctly to an embarrassing extent – or is it unwillingness? Let us have a look at two striking misinterpretations of his. The first one has to do with a quotation from the *Introduction aux études historiques* (1898) written by

Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos. The English translation that Philips uses in his main text reads:

“... when the events to be related were ancient, so that no man then living could have witnessed them, and no account of them had been preserved by oral tradition, what then? Nothing was left but to collect documents of every kind, principally written ones, relating to the distant past which was to be studied.” (Langlois and Seignobos 1898, cited on p.613)

Here, Langlois and Seignobos are obviously saying two things: First, if there are no living witnesses and no (reliable) oral traditions available anymore, then the historian has to search for “documents of every kind”. Secondly, “written ones” are to be preferred.

Philips` comment reads quite differently. “This [statement of Langlois and Seignobos] seems to suggest that oral traditions are to be preferred to purely documentary history.” (p.613) This suggestion is clearly a malicious misunderstanding, for *not them* are playing “oral sources” off against “written sources” but Philips. Langlois and Seignobos obviously view oral and written traditions as complimentary sources for the historian (although they seem to have been conscious of the fact that there are historical times for which either only one of them or neither of them are available). Philips goes on to write, “It [i.e. Langlois and Seignobos` quote] certainly makes clear that historians are not forbidden by the rules of their craft from using oral traditions.” (p.613) Of course, historians are not “forbidden” to use oral data – no one has ever decreed such a ban –, however, (1) a majority of historians have restricted themselves in this regard for a long time; (2) there are times, places and issues in history for which oral data are either not available or not reliable; (3), at any rate, as in case of written documentaries, oral traditions must always be checked by the historian according to common rules of *Quellenkritik*, the combined art of text exegesis plus contextualization. Whether he deals with written or spoken “texts” is in this respect only of secondary importance.

However, Philips does not seem to be conscious of this being the elementary technique of historical study. At all events, he does not make use of it. Another instance which demonstrates his ignorance of history is given on the occasion of his summary of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel`s 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy of history – a contempt which is also directed towards

published historical research, as again no single reference is made. Not entirely incorrectly, Philips starts his summary, "The usual argument against African history was the Hegelian argument that history studies the political evolution of humanity" (p.613). To Hegel politics seemed indeed the single most important expression of his *Weltgeist* and, therefore, the privileged object of historical thought.

Yet, "The usual argument against African history" *was not* "the Hegelian argument", as Philips is ready to claim in the continuation of the quoted sentence, "[...] that Africa represents the baseline of human political evolution, the primitive beginnings from which the rest of humanity evolved." (p.613f) In Hegel's philosophical system of history, Africa played no such role. In fact, Hegel did not consider it "the primitive beginnings from which the rest of humanity evolved" but, quite to the contrary, he held Africa to represent the absolute antipode to humanity. As history and *Geist* meant the same to him and as he denied Africans equal mental capacities, in Hegel's version of World History there simply was no history in Africa at all. In reality, *this* was the "usual" argument against African history derived from Hegel ... that they allegedly had never made a contribution of any relevance to mankind's history, because of their, as it was claimed, "inferior nature" as well as lack of written records (see Sonderegger 2004b: 9ff).

Philips, however, does not only give a deficient account of Hegel's idea of African history which is a pity given that there have been numerous clear demonstrations of its character (see Bernasconi 1998). He seems to be even more confused about writing and its role in and for historiography. Many illustrations of this confusion have already been addressed in the course of the present text. However, one last more has to be given. On p.619, Philips criticizes Junzo Kawada for publishing "three interdisciplinary volumes on the bend of the Niger"<sup>24</sup> on the ground that "[n]one of these three volumes included the contributions of any historians or Islamic studies specialists." At this point of the story it probably needs a special emphasis that this is what Philips considers himself to be, namely, a historian and a specialist in

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<sup>24</sup> Typically for his mode of operation, Philips again gives no bibliographical reference in this case. However, it is probably the following work he has had in mind: *Boucle du Niger: approches multidisciplinaires*. Publié sous la direction de Kawada Junzo. Tokyo: Institut de recherches sur les langues et Cultures d'Asie et d'Afrique, 1988-1994. Note also that even the time frame he gives with regard to this publication – "From 1988 to 1992 the Institute for the Study of the Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa" (p.619) – is incorrect.



Islamic studies.<sup>25</sup> Philips does not inform us that the subject of these volumes are Mandingo communities in the Kita region of today's Mali, which are studied through local oral traditions.

Instead, he makes an attack by claiming that Kawada's interest in "the study of »letterless societies«" were nothing but "supposed" (p.619) – followed by a revealing attempt to explain why his readers should believe this: "for in fact *the societies in question* have centuries of literacy behind them and were the sites of some of the most important centers of learning in the medieval Islamic world." (p.619, my emphasis) The first part of the quoted sentence is simply wrong. Kawada and his team had other societies in mind than Philips, those of the numerous West African societies which have had *not* "centuries of literacy behind them". The societies "in question", those of which Kawada and colleagues speak and those of which Philips speaks, are actually not the same societies.

The second part of the quotation is right as far as it points out the long tradition of Islam in West Africa and the importance it played for the entire Muslim world in former times. It is wrong in its suggestion that the whole of West Africa (or the savanna zone) is completely islamized. However, Philips' mingling of "sites", i.e. a geographical term, describing a (seemingly) timeless area, with "societies", i.e. "living systems" (in Gregory Bateson's sense of the term), is utterly misleading. The contemporary "societies" on which Kawada and colleagues did their research *are*, of course, *not* the "sites" of a long bygone era of Islamic learning. And anyway, that Timbuctoo once was a center of high learning does not disprove the fact that today it is not. The past is not the present ... It is more than a bit odd to have to remind a historian of that simple truth.

Unfortunately, Philips suffers from confusion in other regards as well. "[I]lliterate Islam is", he tells us next, "a contradiction in terms." (p.620) Of course, it would be absurd to deny that Islam is the religion revealed by

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<sup>25</sup> "[...] in the United States [...] it has not always been easy to study Islamic Africa, either. I generally prefer to present papers on Islamic Africa to the Japan Association for Middle East Studies because I don't have to explain what Islam is and I don't have to explain what history is. At an African studies meeting the persons who don't understand, and who sometimes even want to argue about it, are likely to be involved in study of Islamic societies in Africa." (p.624, my emphasis) In contrast to Philips' self-portrayal, I doubt both his ability to explain either Islam or history as well as his suggestion that it is his own choice not to be published in the specialists' learned journals on Islamic Africa ...

Muhammad's *Quran*, therefore Islam is a religion of the book – but anyhow, no one who is in his right mind claims anything similar to that. Yet, it is not less absurd to claim, as Philips does, that there shall be no illiterate societies (and/or individuals) within the borders of Islamic civilization and neighbouring areas, because “writing was unknown in many areas of the African continent before colonialism” (p.620). To know of writing and to be literate, i.e. the skills of reading and writing, are, however, two completely different things. One does not follow automatically from the other.

In West Africa as well as in other regions of the world (including the highly industrialized “northern” countries), there are numerous individuals, sometimes whole communities where literacy is absent. That applies not alone to Muslims but Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, etc. alike. It is simply no matter of religion. It is only in the most stubborn of minds – and maybe in the heads of the adherents of the recently re-emerging “Imperial Ambitions” (Chomsky 2005) as well – that illiteracy is still automatically associated with inferiority. Unfortunately, with Philips this seems to be the case:

“Why these disciples of Balandier [sic!] insist on confining their attention to the savanna zone of West Africa, where even the non-Muslims have been heavily affected by contact with Islamic literacy, is a mystery,”

– a mystery, however, only to people like Philips who are unable or unwilling to look carefully at the data before arbitrarily, unaffected by any evidence, deciding what they believe to be true –

“but it shows the basic weakness of their position. *Had they really been concerned with studying »letterless« societies they could easily have done so elsewhere in Africa.*” (p.619, my emphasis)

Here we have a self-proclaimed “scholar”, having no firm grasp of either his alleged “subject” (Islamic Studies, West African History) or the history of his own discipline (History, Historiography), but being emphatically engaged in an attempt to put a fence up around “his” area of “study”. Needless to say, that such an undertaking in search of immunizing oneself against critique stands in opposition to the very firm principles of science.

## Conclusion

It may be that the three named Japanese Professors of African Studies who have received part of their education in France could be rightly criticized of adhering to a misleading understanding of current streams in historical studies. However, Philips' own account is full of flaws. Neither does the evidence he provides in his paper (or rather lack thereof) allow an objective assessment of the overall quality of these Japanese writers nor is it sufficient to prove the alleged importance of the collegiate link between them and Balandier. We simply do not learn from his text what *they* say; and much of what Philips states is clearly biased, in some instances simply wrong. Even in absence of any first-hand knowledge of the works of those Japanese writers, there can be no hint of a doubt that they deserve both more honest and more competent critics.

Ill-mannered "postmodernism" – a honky-tonky way of both approaching and carrying out research – seems to have, *in personam* Philips, lately arrived in the field of "African history". Reading his article, I was reminded of a once famous phrase of a still famous scholar. Speaking of antecedent thinkers, Sir Isaac Newton wrote in 1676: "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." (cited in Gould 2003: 70) I doubt that Philips is able to grasp the meaning of these words, both humble and true. Be that as it may, let us put an end to this. Just one last word – According to the impact he attributes to Georges Balandier in shaping the thoughts of his students from Japan, Philips should have, at any rate, spelled Balandier's first name correctly.

## Zusammenfassung

Darüber, wie Afrikanische Geschichte geschrieben werden soll, gibt es unterschiedliche Ansichten. Ein amerikanischer Historiker, J.E. Philips, vertritt die seinen in überaus dogmatischer Weise, und in einem 2005 erschienenen Artikel tut er dies anhand der Diskussion, wie in drei verschiedenen Ländern – Japan, Frankreich, USA – die Geschichte Afrikas geschrieben wird. Seine Vergleiche lässt sich dabei auf folgende Grundannahmen reduzieren: die US-Historiographie Afrikas ist das fortgeschrittenste Modell, während die japanische Geschichtsschreibung über Afrika von Unwissenheit, Falschheit und böser Absicht nur so strotze; und in dieser Hinsicht sei

sie bei den geschichtsfeindlichen Franzosen, Georges Balandier und Claude Lévi-Strauss, in die Lehre gegangen. Philips Behandlung der nationalen Denkschulen ist allerdings nicht nur offenkundig polemisch in ihrem Sprachduktus, sondern sie ist auch, was weit schwerer wiegt, von einer ungeheuerlichen Ignoranz und von fehlender Sachkenntnis gekennzeichnet. Dies zu belegen unternimmt der vorliegende Aufsatz; denn in den französischen Traditionen – und wohl auch in denen Japans – gibt es mehr positive Anknüpfungspunkte, um sinnvoll Afrikanische Geschichte zu schreiben, als die unsachlichen Anschuldigungen von Philips ahnen lassen.

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