

preface

The title *On the Fringes of History* recalls a time when neither African history nor world history was a recognized area of specialization for historians. To be sure, some historians wrote about the history of Africa, but few, if any, claimed to be professional Africanists. Some wrote about the history of Egypt. Others were concerned with the history of South Africa. The history of tropical Africa was dominated by those who wrote mainly from the point of view of the imperial conquests, as seen by the victors.

My generation of young historians, which emerged after the Second World War, changed all that. Today professional Africanist historians number in the thousands. The parallel sets of *The Cambridge History of Africa* and the UNESCO *General History of Africa*—eight volumes each—are further evidence of the change. More important still, both sets cover the whole history of the continent from an African point of view.

The emergence of world history was somewhat different. Even before the Second World War, “world history” shared the secondary-school curriculum with American history, but this world history was mainly European history with an added chapter each for the history of South and East Asia. The emergence of a genuine global perspective came from two sources. One was high school teachers who realized that that the textbooks they had to work with fell far short of genuine world perspective. Another was a generation of young historians who were dissatisfied, in several different ways, with the narrow specialization of what often went with historical training in the postwar years. Some thought of themselves as world historians, others simply as comparatists, but together they laid the basis for the broader kind of history that finally emerged. By the early 2000s, this new world history had become one of the most rapidly growing fields of historical studies.