Entrevista

EDWARD ALPERS

Immersed in the Study of Africa

East Africa AND THE Indian Ocean

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Entrevista conduzida por **Vanessa S. Oliveira***
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Edward A. Alpers is Research Professor at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). He also taught at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and the Somali National University, Lafoole. In 1994 he was President of the African Studies Association (USA). His major publications are Ivory and Slaves in East Central Africa (1975); Walter Rodney: Revolutionary and Scholar (1982); Africa and the West: A Documentary History from the Slave Trade to Independence (2001); History, Memory and Identity (2001); Sidis and Scholars: Essays on African Indians (2004); Slavery and Resistance in Africa and Asia (2005); Slave Routes and Oral Tradition in Southeastern Africa (2005); Resisting Bondage in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia (2007); Cross-Currents and Community Networks: The History of the Indian Ocean World (2007); East Africa and the Indian Ocean (2009); The Indian Ocean in World History (2014); and Changing Horizons of African History (2017).

Vanessa Oliveira (VO): You are Research Professor (Emeritus) of African History at the University of California, Los Angeles. What led you first to study and then specialize in this particular field of historical study? Subquestion: what were then the major challenges you faced?

Edward Alpers (EA): The simple answer is that I was attracted to the study of African history through a combination of my interests in black popular music (roots, blues, r&b) and my engagement in the civil rights movement, but like all simple answers the reality is much more complex. When I began my undergraduate education I was completely without focus, having enjoyed my high school years rather more for its social life than its academic challenges. I was very fortunate to be admitted to Harvard University, largely on my family's distinguished records there and my "potential".
I began as a pre-med student, no doubt reflecting the fact that both of my parents and one of my older brothers were physicians. That was an academic disaster, and for the first two years of my college experience I continued to wander academically. At the same time, I was involved in civil rights activity in Boston, picketing Woolworth's because while it had integrated its lunch counters in the North, they remained segregated in the South, and I continued to follow black popular music closely, as I had ever since junior high school. In the second semester of my sophomore year I finally completed my General Education science requirement by taking a fascinating course on early hominids that was taught by Belgian visiting professor Jean Hiernaux, who had undertaken original research in Africa. I completed a paper on the discovery of Australopithecus in South Africa and received an "A". What a change! When I returned from my summer job in September 1961 I saw that, for the first time at Harvard, someone was offering a course in African history. I headed straight to the department of history office, asked if I could do my Junior Tutorial with this new instructor, Robert I. Rotberg, and shift my

* **SSHRC Post-Doctoral Fellow. Department of Historical and Cultural Studies. University of Toronto.**

1 This interview took place over email between September 20 and October 8, 2016. My thanks to Dr. Alpers for agreeing to answer my questions and the candid nature of his responses.

focus to African history. Go ahead, I was told, ask Dr. Rotberg. The key point to make here is that all of this was instinctive; it involved no clear thought or plan on my part. Indeed, it is my own experience to follow my instinct that informed my advice to UCLA undergraduates for almost half a century.

So, in my junior year I took Rotberg's year-long course on African history, which focused mainly on political history, did my year-long tutorial in African history with him, and took every class available on Africa that Harvard offered. I had semester-long classes on African politics with Rupert Emerson and Martin Kilson, on African anthropology with Elizabeth Colson, who was visiting from Brandeis, and on African economics with Eliot Berg. Thus immersed in the study of Africa, my grades shot up as an index of my renewed intellectual engagement. Of course, all of this was played out against the larger background of the developing civil rights movement and the "winds of change" in Africa itself. Several important colonial and African nationalists visited Harvard at that time, including A. A. J. Van Bilsen, who in 1955 drafted the then preposterous plan to give the Belgian Congo independence in thirty years' time; Stewart Gore-Browne, a major figure in white opposition to colonial rule in Northern Rhodesia; and Kenneth Kaunda, later first president of Zambia. Meanwhile, my continuing engagement with African American roots music was fueled by visits to Harvard by Sleepy John Estes, Mississippi John Hurt, and Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. Heady times. When I passed my Junior Qualifying Exams I sat an oral exam that included the Chair of the department, an historian of western science, who was clearly curious to see what kind of person would take to the study of African history. But other than being an object of curiosity, I felt nothing but support and empowerment to follow what had become my passion.

In my senior year I wrote my thesis on a curious Francophile American named Charles Chaillé-Long, who had served in the Sudan with Charles Gordon and in 1874 became the second Euro-American to visit the court of Muteesa II of Buganda. Part of the research for the thesis was accomplished in the archives of the Library of Congress, which holds Chaillé-Long's papers, an opportunity that whetted my appetite for working with primary source materials. Rotberg, who had completed his D. Phil. at Oxford, encouraged me to apply to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, where I was accepted for a research degree upon my graduation from Harvard in 1963. During the following summer I carved out a paper on Chaillé-Long's Buganda episode and sent it off to Kampala for publication in *The Uganda Journal*. I received notification that the journal accepted it for publication during my first weeks in London. Here I should note that at my retirement party in June 2013, my dear colleague, Merrick Posnansky, the very last speaker, surprised me by recounting that he had been the reader for that paper. Circles within circles.

At this point I need to emphasize that none of what I achieved in college or since would have been possible without the love and critical support of my wife and partner for fifty-three years, Annie Alpers. We sat next to each other our very first day of class in French A and by the end of the year were a couple. It was she who pretty much saved me from myself in my sophomore year and who kept me focused thereafter. We married the day after our graduations (she from Radcliffe).

When I arrived at SOAS, Roland Oliver, with whom I thought I would be working, advised me to meet with the different members of the African history faculty, which I dutifully did. When I first met Richard Gray, who became my wonderful adviser, he asked me how I felt about learning Portuguese. "Why not?", I responded, having only just begun to study German the previous summer. He then handed me the International Africa Institute Ethnographic Survey

on *The Matrilineal Peoples of East-Central Africa* by Mary Tew (later Douglas) and basically told me to start with that anthropological compendium. Shortly thereafter Annie and I began to study Portuguese at the Luso-Brazilian Council in London. By the time I presented my first SOAS seminar paper in Spring 1964, I had begun to read the basic Portuguese texts on the history of Mozambique, most notably the outstanding studies by Alexandre Lobato and the collections of primary documents collated by António Alberto Banha de Andrade and Luís Fernando de Carvalho Dias, as well as works in English by Charles R. Boxer and James Duffy. In a short time, therefore, by reading against the grain of the Portuguese sources, I had identified a topic focusing on African trade in the eighteenth century in northern Mozambique.

Just as I had instinctively learned to follow my passion to study African history and throughout my career passed that piece of advice on to my undergraduate students, Richard Gray gave me one invaluable piece of advice that I endeavored to convey to my many Ph.D. students at UCLA. When I was developing that first SOAS seminar paper, I asked Richard for his guidance about the history of Mozambique. "Well, Ned," he said, "you really know more about that than I." How empowering was that! I suddenly felt that I really did know more than he about the topic I had chosen for my thesis, even if I did not yet understand the full process of completing a major piece of historical research. Throughout the entire process of research and writing, much of it carried on by mail between Lisbon (where I conducted research in the Academia das Ciências de Lisboa, Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Biblioteca Nacional, and Centro de Estudos Históricos Ultramarinos) and London, Richard was a source of unfailing support and astute advice. In June 1966 I defended my thesis on "The role of the Yao in the trade of east-central Africa" (a title that Richard suggested to me) with a very distinguished examination committee of Richard Gray, Charles R. Boxer, and George Shepperson. By July Annie and I were on our way out to Tanzania for me to join the faculty at the University College of Dar es Salaam (later the University of Dar es Salaam) of the (now defunct) University of East Africa and for Annie soon to give birth to our first child in January 1967.

VO: How did you get to the University of California, Los Angeles? Is there a particular reason why you spent your whole career at UCLA?

EA: In my second year at SOAS I almost went to UCLA as a Visiting Lecturer in the history of East Africa to replace an apparently ill Gervase Mathew, who was scheduled to visit from Oxford. Happily, Mathew recovered from whatever ailed him and I was spared the potential embarrassment of lecturing to my graduate student peers at UCLA, most of whom were at UCLA to study with Leonard Thompson. Still, a connection was made when Roland Oliver took me to have drinks with Thompson in Fall 1964, just as a year later Richard took me to drinks with Terry Ranger, who was then recruiting faculty for the new history department at Dar. In the end I had two bona fide jobs in my pocket before I defended my thesis, both through the "old boys" connections that dominated academic hiring in the 1960s. Since I was already committed to a two-year contract at Dar, UCLA generously gave me an immediate leave of absence. So while my formal appointment dated to July 1966, I did not actually arrive in Los Angeles until Spring Quarter 1968, when I began to teach at UCLA.

Why did I remain at UCLA? Was there a better place for an historian of Africa? Depending on the year, there were always at least four of us in the Africa field in History, quite apart from the array of Africanist talent in many other disciplines, as well as the ability to study several African languages. We had a steady entry of first-rate graduate

students, a supportive department, and an outstanding library collection. Moreover, UCLA had a distinguished African Studies M.A. program that not only provided additional bodies for our graduate seminars, but funneled many of its graduates into our Ph.D. program in History. Why leave? When I entered administration in 1985, first as Dean of the Honors Program and then to create an all-encompassing unit of Honors and Undergraduate Programs in the College of Letters & Science I ran the risk of putting my scholarly career on hold more or less permanently, but after a fallow period in the late 1980s the arrival of a particularly engaging cohort of graduate students re-energized me so that, having flirted with continuing a career in higher administration at various liberal arts colleges, in 1996 I returned to full-time duty in my home department, where I remained until my retirement in 2013.

Another factor in my remaining at UCLA was my collaboration with Christopher Ehret. Together we shared direction of many graduate students, giving UCLA a pre-eminent place both nationally and internationally in training historians of eastern Africa. When Merrick Posnansky joined the department in 1976 to replace Terry Ranger, who after five years at UCLA decided to return to England in 1974, he combined with Chris to train an important clutch of graduate students in the methods of early African history. That was another attraction of being at UCLA.

There is, of course, more to life than one's academic home, and when Annie and I arrived in Los Angeles we regarded it as yet another foreign culture, for we had lived abroad in London, Lisbon, and Dar es Salaam, for almost five years without setting foot in the United States. L.A. was an exciting urban environment to which we immediately took; we also had our second child there in 1970. Between great professional sports teams, a terrific music scene, a burgeoning art community, and an incredibly multicultural eating environment – not to mention the weather – we never had a thought to leave Los Angeles. At least not until my retirement.

Finally, I remain attached to UCLA because of the excellent way in which the University of California treats its emeritus faculty. Although I live hundreds of miles from campus, Chris and I still share an office; I have library privileges and the outstanding support of a wonderful Africa specialist librarian; I am eligible for research and conference travel funding. This kind of institutional support is one of the reasons why I have been able to be productive in the four years since my "retirement".

VO: You have supervised a total of 62 doctoral dissertations on various aspects of the African past. In retrospect, what were the more important challenges in this process over the years?

EA: Here is where Richard Gray's words were most effective. One of the real strengths of the UCLA program was that for the most part we were not prescriptive in the kind of research we supervised. In general, we waited to hear from our students what it was that inspired them, what it was the drove their desire to do a Ph.D. in African history. In this respect we were distinctly different from the University of Wisconsin during the heyday of Philip Curtin and Jan Vansina. To be sure, the generation of scholars that Wisconsin produced during that era is unmatched, but I always enjoyed the very great flexibility that both we, as faculty, and our students enjoyed in finding themselves at UCLA. So although few of my students did research in areas in which I specialized, each brought her or his specific experience and knowledge to the process, one from which I surely learned as much as my students learned from me. What I provided was as much support as I could, whether psychologically or by helping them to find funding for their studies, academic advising, and very close editing of their written work. I suppose that the

biggest challenge over the years was how to manage the differences among graduate students in terms of funding, personal and educational backgrounds, and command of academic English. The other interesting challenge was to help individuals who entered the program (often as former Peace Corps Volunteers) with little or no undergraduate training or even course experience in History. Doing History as an academic discipline is not an instinctive process; it must be learned, even if some people seem naturally to have a knack for it. It was always especially rewarding to work with such students and to see them figure out how to be historians.

VO: How many of these supervisions have been on the area of your own specialization? How do you explain so many dissertations supervised outside of your own area of specialization?

EA: As I said, very few of my students worked in my areas of specialization, whether you define those as precolonial trade, the slave trade, coastal East Africa, Mozambique, or the Indian Ocean. Certainly, a number of my students worked on aspects of eastern African history (including northeast Africa), but mostly not on topics on which I worked. Indeed, most of them worked on issues in colonial or postcolonial history, an area into which I have only occasionally ventured and for which I am not particularly known. Individuals who worked closest to my own areas of research and writing include Peg Strobel, Randy Pouwels, and Matt Hopper. (In fact, Matt and I have published a major research article together, but that is an exception). Nevertheless, the fact that I taught lecture courses and gave seminars in general East and Northeast African topics, as well as on the slave trade, the African diaspora, and African women provided an opening for graduate students who took these classes to seek me out as their adviser. The same process worked for Chris Ehret; by regularly giving graduate seminars on the methodology of using language evidence to reconstruct early African history he attracted a variety of fine graduate students, several of whom now carry on his work in their own ways. Another intangible factor in graduate education is what can only be described as finding a comfort level between a student and her or his adviser. Apparently, many graduate students in African history at UCLA liked working with me, whatever their own area of experience in Africa and research focus. I was happy to accommodate them.

VO: In your view, why did you end up supervising so many dissertations, particularly, on Angola and Mozambique? With John Thornton, José Curto, T. J. Desch Obi, Roquinaldo Ferreira, Carolyn Vieira-Martinez, and Jeremy Ball as your former students, to what extent would you say that the History of Angola is effectively dominated by a UCLA or perhaps an Alpers' school of thought?

EA: That's an interesting question. Mozambique ought not to be a surprise, since my research both began with and has continued to be significantly about Mozambique. That said, only three people worked specifically on Mozambican topics: the late Alan K. Smith, who was really inspired to work on trade in precolonial southern Mozambique by Richard Gray when he visited UCLA and whose dissertation I co-chaired with Leonard Thompson after Leonard left UCLA for Yale; Kathie Sheldon, whose dissertation on "Working Women in Beira, Mozambique" ultimately informed her important book, *Pounders of Grain: A History of Women, Work and Politics in Mozambique*; and L. Lloys Frates, who wrote on "Aesthetics of Power, Power of Aesthetics: Race and Gender in Colonial Lourenço Marques, 1932-1974." Gregory Pirio, "Commerce, Industry and Empire: The Making of Modern Colonialism in Angola and Mozambique, 1890-1914," and Martin Shapiro, M. D., "Medicine

in the Service of Colonialism: Medical Care in Portuguese Colonial Africa, 1885-1974," completed fine dissertations on Portuguese colonial rule that included comparisons of Mozambique and Angola.

The Angola connection is more surprising, although to some extent it also reflects my graduate seminars on what I then called Portuguese Africa. I must confess, however, that John Thornton came to UCLA fully ready (and with plenty of microfilmed documents) to study the kingdom of Kongo and West Central Africa (he completed his degree in 1979). His decision was truly not influenced by me. José Curto may have come to UCLA to study with me, but his dissertation was on the history of alcohol on Angola, a topic about which I knew very little and about which I have never written a word. After José finished up in 1996, however, I think his advice was instrumental in bringing Roquinaldo Ferreira, who had already conducted research in Angola for his M.A. thesis in Brazil, to work with me. T. J. Desch Obi, on the other hand, had been working with the late Boniface Obichere and I was the second Africanist on his committee, but when Bonny died, I became his supervisor (as I did also for Nwando Achebe and Bridget Teboh, two decidedly West Africanists). (As a side note, it is interesting that T. J.'s focus on African martial arts has now expanded to the Indian Ocean.) Jeremy Ball had studied at Boston College with one of my earliest Ph.D. students, David Northrup, and having spent a summer internship in Luanda was already interested in doing a dissertation topic on modern Angola when he came to UCLA. Finally, Carolyn Vieira-Martinez defined a topic on Angola based on historical language evidence that she developed with Chris Ehret. My role in all of these dissertations on Angola derives from the fact that Portuguese is one of my main research languages and my broader interest in Lusophone Africa.

What I think this accounting ought to demonstrate is that, while I may have supervised the dissertations of more Angola specialists than anyone else, there is most definitely not "an Alpers' school of thought" at play here.

VO: Now that you are retired, what are your plans for the future and what do you see as further developments in the History of Africa as a subfield?

EA: Being "retired" is even more fun than being a graduate student in that all I have to worry about professionally is my research and writing (and to try not to overcommit myself). In recent years my focus has shifted increasingly to larger Indian Ocean world themes, the culmination of which has been *The Indian Ocean in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). While I have a number of uncompleted major projects, some based on earlier research, others on more recent work, my Indian Ocean focus has drawn me into new areas of research in environmental history, the history of disease dispersion, islands, and maritime history. But I still keep returning to Mozambique and the connections across the Mozambique Channel and out into the southwest Indian Ocean. This year I have also been co-editing three sets of papers from very different conferences for publication. I also serve as a Senior Editor for the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History, which is very much a product of my Indian Ocean publications. So "retirement" keeps me very busy and promises to do so for years to come.

Regarding the future of the field of African History my first instinct is to state that the future rests in others' hands, especially considering my current oceanic focus. To be sure, the field has reached a level of scholarly maturity that one could not envisage when I started to study African history in the Fall of 1961. This process of maturation is reflected in several personal memoirs by pioneers in the field and by some field and institutional histories. Overall, the field is still struggling with the

dichotomy between institutional support (including universities, scholarly journals, and research funding) for Euro-American-based Africanists and those working on the continent. While the different African Studies Associations in North America and Europe now count many more Africans among their membership than ever before, there is still a broadly-defined gulf that remains to be bridged between those working outside of Africa and those working at African universities. In the United States, however, my sense is that the rise of world history as a field, including the subfield of Atlantic history, has enhanced the position of African history as a critical component of this more global appreciation of our collective pasts. The same holds true, of course, for Indian Ocean history. Finally, I think that the field still needs more basic research on precolonial history, including working in collaboration with historical archaeologists and scholars in other related disciplines.