

In Memory of Christopher Ehret (July 27, 1941–March 25, 2025)

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Christopher Ehret, one of the most distinguished of historical linguists working on African and global materials, died on March 25, 2025, of the after-effects of a cardiac arrest in April 2022. His scholarship maintained high standards in studies of African languages and advanced the early history of Africa through language. His research brought high points in classification and reconstruction of African languages, archaeological studies that clarified early changes in African technology, economy, and society. He was employed at UCLA from the award of his PhD in 1968, became a full professor in 1978, and then held an emeritus Distinguished Professorship from his retirement in 2011.

His principal books were works on Southern Nilotic and Southern Cushitic history, and volumes on the reconstruction of Afroasiatic and Nilo-Saharan languages. These include:

- *An African Classical Age*
- *The Archaeological and Linguistic Reconstruction of African History*
- *History and the Testimony of Language*
- *Ancient Africa: A Global History, to 300 CE*
- *Civilizations of Africa.*

Ehret spent most of his life in Southern California, particularly Ventura County. He and I first met in 1959, when we were both 18 and part of a cohort of twenty male freshmen at Caltech. Because we were local Southern Californians, we had to live off campus; we became friends and often had dinner with a small group at a nearby drugstore. Ehret was an immensely lively and gifted student, but the scientific curriculum proved not to be his preference. After the first year he transferred to the nearby University of Redlands, where he earned a BA in history that included work in African history and linguistics. He later pursued graduate study in historical linguistics at Northwestern University. We met again in early 1966, this time as students in a multidisciplinary seminar for dissertation researchers preparing for fieldwork in Africa, taught by the noted Jan Vansina at the University of Wisconsin. By then I too had moved into African history and was preparing a Wisconsin dissertation in economic history. We remained in touch throughout his life.

He conducted dissertation research in Kenya for two years, where he established a life-long tie with historian Bethwell A. Ogot, a founding historian of East Africa who served as Chancellor of Moi University until 2013. Ehret completed dissertation work and was employed in 1968 as one of four young historians of Africa at UCLA, along with Edward Alpers, Robert Griffiths, and Boniface Obichere. In 1976, archaeologist Merrick Posnansky joined the History Department as the senior Africanist, and he and Ehret rapidly collaborated on a co-edited, multidisciplinary book.⁴

Ehret's early publications, in 1967 and 1968, were adventurous: linguistic analyses of the spread of cattle and milking and then of sheep in Africa, arguing that livestock moved from Central

⁴ Posnansky and Ehret, *The Archaeological and Linguistic Reconstruction of African History* (1982)

Sudanic-speaking areas of the Upper Nile to regions far to the south in a time before Bantu-speaking people had occupied Eastern and Southern Africa. While he was to revise certain of these arguments in time, his early commitment to such analysis enabled him to sharpen his thinking for another half-century.

Viewed over a longer time frame, Ehret created his own path but also echoed the work of Joseph H. Greenberg, who classified the languages of Africa in publications from 1948 to 1963. Greenberg further demonstrated that Bantu languages originated in the Cameroon grasslands, adjoining similar language groups, in contrast to the existing interpretation of Malcolm Guthrie. Ehret took his PhD at Northwestern, where Greenberg had studied in the 1930s. Like Greenberg, he too published research on all four African language phyla, working at multiple levels. He published detailed books on reconstruction of Afroasiatic languages (1995) and Nilo-Saharan languages (2001), where reconstruction is the detailed follow-up of classification. His studies of Khoesan addressed both classification and reconstruction.⁵

For the Kongo-Kordofanian language family, Ehret focused primarily on Bantu languages. In the generation following Greenberg's classification, numerous scholars elaborated the details of Bantu linguistic history and migration, among them Ehret, who contributed several important articles. In 2001 a special issue of a journal centered on his lead article reviewing these advances; it included fourteen scholarly commentaries and Ehret's response.⁶ In 2015, three of Ehret's former graduate students published a concise survey of 5500 years of Bantu social history, arguably the best social history of a large region over such an extended time span.⁷

In Afroasiatic languages, Ehret's studies added much new knowledge, though debates continued on the location of the Afroasiatic homeland. Greenberg had coined the term "Afroasiatic" to replace the limited and biased "Hamito-Semitic" classification that gave primacy to the place of Semitic. Ehret approved of Igor Diakonoff's 1975 proposed revision of the title to "Afrasian"; in practice Ehret used both "Afroasiatic" and "Afrasian". Classification within this phylum was strengthened by Harold Fleming's 1969 argument that Omotic languages of Ethiopia should be considered as a separate group, parallel to all other Afroasiatic languages. Ehret adopted Fleming's discovery and treated Omotic as one of two original Afroasiatic subgroups, the other being Erythraic. This new framework added a stage to the evolution of Afroasiatic and likely expanded its time-frame.⁸

But the thesis of Hamito-Semitic as languages arising in Asia, effectively challenged by Greenberg, returned every generation in a new form, using civilizational categorization as an implicit or explicit factor rather than using language only as a basis of classification. Pederson's initial 1903 proposal for Nostratic languages comprised languages of Eurasia, including Hamito-

⁵ Ehret's reconstructions of Afroasiatic and Nilo-Saharan do not give full accounts of sound changes among the languages but take a substantial step in that direction. His studies of Khoesan included a dictionary of Sandawe (co-authored with Patricia Ehret) and a study of extinct Khoesan languages of East Africa.

⁶ C. Ehret, "Bantu Expansions: Re-envisioning a Central Problem of Early African History," and "Christopher Ehret Responds," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, 1 (2001): 5–41 and 82–87. (Pp. 42–81: responses from 14 scholars).

⁷ Catherine Cymone Fourshey, Rhonda M. Gonzales, and Christine Saidi. *Bantu Africa: 3500 BCE to Present*. Oxford University Press, 2017

⁸ Ehret later analyzed classification and reconstruction of Omotic languages.

Semitic in Asia and Africa. Post-war Russian linguists expanded their view of Nostratic to include Caucasian and Dravidian languages. Supporters of an expanded Nostratic phylum occasionally treated Indo-European and Semitic as founding groups rather than as subordinates in the proposed macro-family. This had the effect of underestimating the historical depth of Afroasiatic and Nostratic. In contrast, Ehret emphasized Semitic as a subordinate group in Afroasiatic, while Greenberg's 2000 publication proposed a Eurasiatic phylum that included Indo-European as one of six principal subgroups in northeastern Eurasia.

The underestimation of the time depth of Afroasiatic was especially evident in an influential *Science* article by Jared Diamond and Peter Bellwood. Citing Diakonoff, they argued that Afroasiatic originated with the rise of food production in the Levant around 9500 BCE and later spread into Egypt and North Africa with agricultural expansions around 5000 BCE. In their published response, Ehret, Keita, and Newman demonstrated that Diamond and Bellwood had misrepresented Diakonoff's views, and they further argued that Afroasiatic originated in Africa at least ten millennia earlier.⁹

In a dozen articles written after 2000, Ehret continued to offer details on the North Erythraean subgroup of Afroasiatic, based in northern Ethiopia, and its subdivisions to the north (Egyptian), east (Semitic), and west (Chadic and Amazigh). While details are yet to be worked out, especially in the timing, geography, and classification of Semitic languages, Ehret left a consistent vision of the structure and timing of Afroasiatic, and of its interactions with adjoining phyla in Africa and Eurasia.

Meanwhile, much of Ehret's work addressed localized issues alongside broader phylum-wide structures. His separate analyses of Nilo-Saharan, Kongo-Kordofanian, and Afroasiatic languages traced the gradual westward movement of languages from the Nile Valley within each family, each associated with its own characteristic economic and social patterns. In this work, Ehret engaged with a rich and expanding literature in African history, archaeology, and oral tradition (see his *Testimony of Language*), including a recent proposed linkage between the languages of the Kordofan Hills and Kordofanian groups in West Africa, themselves related to Niger-Congo. Likewise, another line of his research followed the gradual southward and westward movements from East Africa of Khoesan, Nilo-Saharan, and Kongo-Kordofanian languages.

Through the wide range of Ehret's studies in geography and social scale, he developed broad-based knowledge of early African history. I think he may have known more about the early history of Africa and the implications of that history than any other person. He expressed that knowledge in his 2002 *Civilizations of Africa*, which expanded the geographical and temporal scope for teaching African history up to 1800, in a book widely used in undergraduate courses. This text relied on the balance of bottom-up history and broad interpretation in his earlier books at language-group and regional scale. The second edition, in 2016, was confirmed as the most successful textbook on early Africa.

⁹ C. Ehret, S. O. Y. Keita, and Paul Newman. "The Origins of Afroasiatic," *Science* 306 (3 December 2004): 1680–1681; Jared Diamond and Peter Bellwood, "Farmers and Their Languages: The First Expansions," *Science* 597 (2003): 597–603.

To list just a few of Ehret's many other accomplishments were his co-authorship of two chapters on East Africa in the UNESCO *General History of Africa*; his remarkable article on "Reconstructing Ancient Kinship in Africa";¹⁰ his co-authorship in four major articles on genetic analysis of African history; his methodological analysis, *History and the Testimony of Language* (2011); and the Huggins Lectures on early African history that he delivered at Harvard on November 5, 6, and 7, of 2021.¹¹

The delivery of the Huggins Lectures gave Ehret the opportunity and encouragement to write a concise survey of African history. What appeared was a brilliant work, *Ancient Africa: A Global History to 300 AD*, published posthumously in 2023. He chose such "firsts" in Africa as ceramics, early agriculture, iron production, commercial towns, all in the savanna and Sahara. In a chapter on "The Africanity of Egypt," Ehret traced the movements of Afroasiatic-speakers from 20,000 BC in Ethiopia toward the lower Nile, settling among previous inhabitants and maintaining Afroasiatic-descended languages, with subgroups moving on to east and west. He joins this story to the rise of the Middle Nile Culture Area among speakers of Nilo-Saharan languages, especially 6000–3100 BP, where Qustul rose as a state with its Nabta Playa ritual center, the southern neighbor to the Afroasiatic-speaking Naqada state. As drought weakened the savanna and Qustul, Naqada thrived and conquered Qustul, forming the Old Kingdom of Egypt but retaining its ritual ties to Qustul. The concluding chapter of *Ancient Africa* is a narrative of the world history of speaking humans, showing the prominent place of Africa in the totality. Ehret notes the parallels in developments among world regions yet shows that African developments often preceded those in other regions. Thus the book addresses many of the specific issues on which Ehret has written over the years, with his updated statements on language and history; yet it is also a model of a way to write a continental history in a global context.

Shortly after submitting his manuscript to Princeton University Press, he suffered a severe cardiac arrest. He survived and lived comfortably but was no longer able to work on the book. Princeton University Press and Patricia Ehret were able to arrange a plan for editorial corrections that brought the book into print in 2023.

Chris Ehret put a great amount of energy into interaction and care for his family, including children, grandchildren, and close friends. His family interactions supported his scholarly activities. The Ehret family organized a memorial service on July 27, 2025, with a Zoom connection that included numerous participants in addition to the many more at the California site. Family members and colleagues spoke briefly but movingly, with heartfelt expressions of his kindness, his modesty and brilliance. He was tenacious in pursuing his many interests but was never combative. The proceedings of the memorial service were taped, including a wonderful photo montage of Chris's life.

¹⁰ In Nicholas J. Allen, Hilary Callan, Robin Dunbar, and Wendy James (eds.), *Early Human Kinship: From Sex to Social Reproduction*, pp. 200–231, 259–269. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.

¹¹ <https://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/event/huggins-lectures-christopher-ehret-1-3>