

**Joseph C. Miller**  
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## Joseph C. Miller

If historians are fond of saying the “past is another country,” then historians of Africa are in another world. According to Joseph C. Miller, one important task of Africanists is to convey both the alienness of premodern Africa and the ability of historians to understand it. Miller believes that the purpose of history is to teach that all things are impermanent and this lesson crosses all cultural and temporal barriers, so the lesson can be learned in the unfamiliar terrain of 15th-century Angola or the more comfortable recent history of the United States.

Miller was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. His family owned a large furniture store and he was planning to pursue a business career. To that end, Miller went to college at Wesleyan and then earned an MBA at Northwestern in 1963. But residence in other parts of the country and a stint as an exchange student in Sweden, made him unwilling to take up life as a businessman in a small midwestern town, so he decided to pursue a career in academia. While Miller knew he wanted to work in history, he was uncertain which area to study. Following advice of friends who thought the job market was saturated in European and American history, he opted for “non-Western” history at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. But non-Western is a big field, and when the time came to choose a seminar to start, Miller was drawn to Africa mostly because he did not know anything about it. This series of accidents—one shared by a good many of the pioneers in African history—was the beginning of a notable career as an Africanist.

African history was an exciting new discipline in the mid-1960s, and Wisconsin was one of the most important, if not the most important, center of it. Miller’s seminar in 1963 included a good number of future eminent Africanists, including Iris Berger, Jean Hay, Joel Samoff, and the Brazilianist-to-be Mary Karasch. The faculty were young and enthusiastic, and the general tone was that of explorers entering a new territory. Doing African history was working

in “virgin soil”; some of the documentation, indeed much of it, had never been examined by historians before. In fact, a good deal of it had never been analyzed by anyone after it had been filed. For many areas there was no existing historiography and for many others it consisted of little more than harebrained colonial writing with little scholarship to back it up. Most of the budding historians at Wisconsin were discovering the primary sources and simultaneously creating the first items of serious modern historiography for substantial areas of Africa.

Miller, like most other students of the time, went in for precolonial history. In fact, very few of the new graduate students studied the more recent history, but instead took on the more exciting and challenging task of re-creating Africa before the European colonization. In order to reconstruct this history, the most important methodology was the use of oral tradition. Since so many African societies did not have any system of writing or did not keep written records, the only way to recover their more remote histories was to tap into and study their orally transmitted recollections of the past. At Wisconsin Jan Vansina was the guru (or perhaps the griot—since this term, borrowed from West Africa, was a generic name for those who recalled tradition) of oral tradition—his book *Oral Tradition* was the bible of the field. Vansina had been instrumental in getting Wisconsin to require that every graduate of the program collect and study oral tradition for his or her thesis. Vansina in turn fired the graduate students up for the study of central Africa where his own work had been.

Miller did his master's thesis in 1967 on the Cokwe in eastern Angola. At that time, the hottest interpretative field was examining the connection between long distance trade and politics, and a portion of Miller's work on trade and Cokwe expansion was published in 1970 in the most important and influential work on the trade topic, David Birmingham and Richard Gray's *Pre-Colonial African Trade in Eastern and Central Africa*.

When the time came for a doctoral dissertation topic, Miller chose the Imbangala in eastern Angola rather than the Cokwe. The Imbangala had a longer history, and were seen as a part of a complex series of 16th-century migrations from central to west central Africa that Vansina and others had identified as being critically important. The solution to this problem might be found by using the new field of critical oral tradition.

In 1969 Miller was off to Angola for his field work, some nine months of collecting oral tradition. Work in Angola was not the tedious yet often pleasant work that so many historians encounter working in archives. At the time Angola was in the throes of the long war that led to its decolonization, and field research was difficult. Though the actual fighting was relatively far away, the Portuguese government was not anxious to allow foreigners to wander freely in the country, and placed a number of restrictions on his movement and contacts. At one point, Miller arrived for dinner at the house of some missionaries whose hospitality allowed him to work in the area only to find that they had left, hurried and just ahead of the security forces, with dinner on the table. Nevertheless, Miller was able to contact bearers of oral tradition and came back with the critical data necessary to start unravelling the problem.

Miller's thesis did much more than propose how the Imbangala were a part of the great migration. It also broke new ground in the interpretation of oral tradition. Miller proposed that earlier methods of using these sources had been overly literal, and in fact tradition had to be seen in layers and strands of differing degrees of literal truth. The traditions also had to be analyzed along with the place of tradition in the society itself. Thus Miller's thesis, defended in 1972 and subsequently published as *Kings and Kinsmen: The Imbangala Impact on the Mbundu of Angola* in 1976, was a groundbreaking work for the reconstruction not just of the history of the Imbangala but also the Mbundu people as a whole in the period before 1650. Miller tried to show how the earliest Portuguese documentation that began appearing about

1500 could contribute to the solution of the problems he was examining, and thus the work was also a model in combining the more traditional document-based approach with innovations in analyzing oral tradition.

*Kings and Kinsmen* was glowingly reviewed and became quite influential in African studies in general and Angolan history in particular. Its introduction is a model for the handling and analysis of oral tradition, and it remains the pioneering work to attempt to apply modern oral traditions to a systematic reconstruction of Mbundu society before the arrival of the Portuguese. It is a tribute to the work's influence that the Historical Archive of Angola decided to publish a Portuguese translation of the book (it appeared in 1997), having determined it to be the starting point for the period it covers in Angolan history. It is rare in the ever-changing field of African history for a book to receive this sort of recognition two decades after its first appearance, and is certainly an indication that the book has earned the title of classic.

After completing the dissertation, Miller found a job at the University of Virginia in 1972. Charlottesville was a good place, and Miller has remained there ever since, rising to professor and serving as dean from 1990 to 1995.

Satisfied with these conditions, Miller continued to work on the theory of oral tradition, and in 1980 published *The African Past Speaks*, which included his own careful introduction, a series of theoretical essays, and case studies on oral tradition. His influence continues in the study of oral tradition to the present day.

Even as he was working on oral traditions and unravelling the early history of the Mbundu-speaking regions of Angola, Miller was interested in a much larger picture. African history transcended the small-scale, often parochial, borders of the vision of oral tradition, and extended across the Atlantic to America.



Miller's work on 16th- and 17th-century Angola, and his work in the Angolan archives for the 18th and 19th centuries made him aware of the significance of the slave trade in both African and world history. He took an interest in this history and produced work on the quantification of the slave trade in central Africa from these sources. Although Miller had pursued his interest in history against a career in business, the business end of the slave trade intrigued him, and he began to investigate the pricing and accounting aspects of this tragic business. In time, he began to understand the business strategies of these early modern businessmen, an understanding that would bear important fruit later.

Miller was not just interested in the international slave trade, for Africanists had already observed that Africa had well-developed domestic and related slave trades. He had already pursued this line in his own field work, and in 1973 produced an important piece on slavery and social change in Imbangala areas, work which he followed up with a more general study of Imbangala slavery for the celebrated collection on African slavery edited by Suzanne Meiers and Igor Kopytoff (1977).

Work on the slave trade led also to a more general interest in slavery as a human institution across cultures and time. To this end, Miller began collecting material on slavery in all areas and all periods. In 1977 Miller published a brief comparative bibliography for people teaching comparative slavery, but soon he was at work on a very extensive bibliography of slavery that was ultimately published in 1993. With supplements that Miller has produced and published annually in the journal *Slavery and Abolition*, this project represents an extremely important contribution to the study of comparative world slavery. In recognition of his expertise and knowledge in the field of comparative history, he became one of the editors of *Slavery and Abolition* (since 1980), and edited a number of projects connected with the study of slavery, including the *Harvard Guide to African-American History* and the *Encyclopedia of Slavery*.

The interest in world and comparative history led Miller to other issues being discussed in this larger field. Miller did extensive research in disease and its impact in Angola and in the slave trade. In addition, Miller investigated the impact of droughts and famines in the development of Angolan history. In time, he began to develop ecological and climatological models for African history and Angola in particular. He unveiled a number of these ideas in a general article on west central Africa published in Longman's *History of Central Africa*.

All these various strands came together in 1988 with the publication of *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade*. The title reflected Miller's important insight that all the businessmen, whether they were African, Afro-Portuguese, Brazilian, or Portuguese, involved in the slave trade oriented their strategies around death, in the ghastly human toll exacted by this massive transcontinental migration. The book was immediately recognized as an important contribution in African and world history. It received the African Studies Association's highest award, the Herskovitts Prize, and a special citation for the Bolton Prize. *Way of Death* began with an overview of a vast sweep of central Africa, tracing its history, social forms, environment, and the sources of the slave trade. He then continued with the details of the business of slaving from the Portuguese colony in Angola through its international connections in Portugal and Brazil, including all the byways and eddies of this huge and terrible business. The book's sheer scope guaranteed interest in many quarters, and indeed, it was reviewed and is cited to this day in journal articles and books in African, Latin American, Caribbean, and U.S. history. Demand for the book for classrooms, in spite of its imposing 800 plus page length, eventually persuaded the University of Wisconsin Press to publish it in paperback.

In 1990 Miller took on the position of dean, and found that he had to put scholarly activities on hold until his term ended in 1995. However, Miller did manage to continue teaching his course on comparative slavery, and to carry on an active



tradition of service to the profession. He became an editor of the *Journal of African History*, the premier English-language journal of African history, in 1990, and managed to become a regular speaker on the "Columbus circuit" in 1992. Miller served on a wide variety of boards and committees, as well as acting as a regular speaker to foreign service officers bound for duty in Africa. This work led to considerable travel, and Miller has been all over Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

Miller's current work, now that he has returned to academic life, is to continue the study of slavery worldwide. At the same time, he hopes to deepen and extend his more detailed special studies in Angola. Miller remains a tireless advocate of world history and of Africa's place in that history. He is routinely cited and consulted by everyone from would-be graduate students to producers of television documentaries for his knowledge of precolonial African history and the African diaspora.

Respectfully submitted,  
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of Pennsylvania

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