PREFACE

The Spatial Factor in African History. The Relationship of the Social, Material, and Perceptual is the product of a planned, long-term effort to bring together scholars who have been applying spatial analysis in their work. From the beginning, we have hoped to demonstrate the usefulness of spatial analysis for many problems in the writing of African history and for current issues as well. The project originated informally when most of the present contributors, and others, began talking after a panel at the 1996 Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, where Allen Howard presented a paper on spatial analysis. At that time, we discovered that we had many common interests and were seeking new ways of applying spatial analysis in our work. All of us agreed with the proposition that social space is not simply something “out there,” a passive backdrop for events, but rather that space and social practices are dynamically linked. We decided that we would form an on-going group to pursue our joint interests. In order to get to know one another’s work, recruit others, and receive criticism about the spatial models we were employing or considering using, five of us participated in a panel we organized at the 1998 Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association. Two of us also joined a panel on spatial analysis at the 1997 Social Science History Association Meeting. All of the chapters here, except one, were originally given as papers at one or more of those conferences. We also met regularly at the Annual Meetings of the African Studies Association to discuss our individual research and writing and the progress of the overall project. Charles Ambler, of the University of Texas at El Paso, and Eli Bentor, of Appalachian State University, were part of our original group and added to the evolution of our thinking, but did not prepare a chapter for this volume.

We also made other efforts to provide an intellectual integrity to this book, even though the particular case studies and theoretical approaches vary significantly. Most important, we selected and circulated a number of theoretical and conceptual writings by geographers and others that we felt were particularly salient for questions of spatiality in the African past. We did not, however, try to find
one way, or “the way” to apply theory. An important feature of this volume is how authors use different theories and illustrate the various directions in which the study of African social space is developing. Nonetheless, we all have sought to extend the spatial approach in four major ways: by demonstrating the active quality of space, applying spatial theory explicitly, focusing on regions, and combining social, material, and perceptual approaches.

We would especially like to thank Margaret Jean Hay, of the African Studies Center at Boston University, for her continuous support and encouragement in the development of this book. Many thanks also to Michael Siegel, Cartographer of the Geography Department at Rutgers University, who created most of the maps and diagrams, and redrafted others from the originals. The Center for Historical Analysis at Rutgers provided a research fund that assisted in the production of the graphics. We are very appreciative of the skilled editorial work and production oversight by our editors at Brill Academic Publications: Joed Elich, Mattie Kuiper, and especially Regine Reincke and Ivo Romein, who saw the manuscript through to completion. In the individual chapters, each of us acknowledges those who gave us critical commentary, as well as support for research and writing. As will be clear in the volume, most of us have been directly or indirectly influenced by the writing and thinking of Jan Vansina, Professor Emeritus at the University of Wisconsin—Madison.

This book is dedicated to the memory and scholarly inspiration of Chris Gray (1958–2000), who died a few months after sending Allen Howard the revised version of his chapter. We all greatly enjoyed Chris’ comradeship and miss his bright personality and insightful contributions. We have asked John Cinnamon, who knew Chris longest and best, to write a brief remembrance, and we also encourage readers to peruse the more extended biography and the bibliography of Chris Gray’s writings that are included in his excellent posthumous monograph.

Piscataway, NJ, June 2004

John Cinnamon writes: I first met Chris Gray in summer 1982 in Libreville, when he arrived in Gabon for Peace Corp training. He was a friendly, thoughtful person, motivated by deep intellectual
curiosity. He had already begun to assemble a library of available publications on Gabonese history and culture. While a Peace Corp volunteer in Mouila, he developed an abiding interest in southern Gabon, which would come to fruition in his 1995 dissertation in history, directed by Phyllis Martin at Indiana University, and his 2002 book, *Colonial Rule and Crisis in Equatorial Africa. Southern Gabon ca. 1850–1940*, with Rochester University Press.

In 1984 Chris transferred to Peace Corps Senegal for two years, then in 1986 enrolled in a Master’s program in African Studies at the School for African and Oriental Studies, London. His master’s thesis compared the works of Cheikh Anta Diop and his prominent Congolese disciple, Théophile Obenga. This study was later published as a book: *Conceptions of History in the Works of Cheikh Anta Diop and Théophile Obenga* (London: Karnak House, 1989).

As a historian, teacher, colleague, and friend, Chris Gray distinguished himself by his thoughtful, probing, original scholarship, his deep integrity and commitment to social justice, and his generosity. He was at the center of a small network of Gabon scholars and also maintained important ties with the African Studies community. Although his life was cut short by cancer at the age of forty-two, he had already made a significant contribution to African Studies and to the lives of all who came into contact with him. His loss is deeply felt by his many friends and colleagues. Chris Gray was a gentleman and a scholar, in the true senses of both terms.

Hamilton, OH, June 2004