

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHIES: ROOTS, CONFLICTS AND TRAJECTORIES

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The following paper considers historiographical trends in contemporary African ecclesiastical and civil circles. Given the relative brevity of this essay and the occasion when it is read, it does not pretend to give an extensive exposition of such currents in this rather vast and multicultural continent. Nonetheless, I hope to paint satisfactorily this landscape despite the limitations, so that the listeners could understand the methodological problems, epistemological controversies, and cultural complexities they would face in doing African history.

In the framing of this paper, I have decided to employ two particular considerations which we seriously take in the craft of history. The first has to do with how the past is reconstructed in our discipline. There are many ways through which the past is re-presented, however, not all writing about the past is history. Unlike other professional scholars and sundry writers, trained practicing historians – from whatever socio-cultural background – are fastidious in gathering sources in order to produce their narratives about the past. In their desire to examine meticulously various aspects of human living in bygone days, they intensively gather and decipher vestiges of the past – ranging widely from archival documents to electronically recorded testimonies. Collectively, these materials form a portal through which present-day readers can imagine a far removed period which historians have reconstructed for them. Historical research and writing, then, entails the discriminating use and critical interpretation of written records and oral traditions, practices which give a high degree of empirical credibility to the work of a historian.

The second point is that the discipline of history does not end with the collection of vestiges from the past. Georg Hegel underscored that history “comprehends not less what has *happened*, than the *narration* of what has happened”¹. What he is implying is that the discipline not only takes the past into account but also the adroitness of historians in their autopsies of the past. At the very core of the practice of history is an interlaced craft of inquiry-observation-judgment. The ancient Greeks had this triad in mind when they coined

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¹ Georg W. F. HEGEL, *The Philosophy of History*. New York, Dover 1956, p. 60.

the word *historia* [ἱστορία] to refer to the expertise of a *histōr* [ἵστωρ, Gk. a judge or wise man] in producing skilled observations, incisive questions, and judicious conclusions regarding events which they did not personally witness². Thus, while the earnest gathering of past records can never be disregarded in the profession, historians weave the data they have gathered to produce narratives, inevitably leaving their prints on their analyses through “a mode of knowing that selects, organizes, orders, interprets, and allegorizes”³.

These two motifs are important to consider as we take stock of current developments in African historiographies. There is clearly no single way to approach the past in Africa. There is not a single historiography, but a number of historiographies in the continent, all distinctively shaped by Africans and Africanists from various regions who are academically formed in distinct schools of thought within and outside the continent⁴. Academic interest in this field incrementally developed since Ghana gained freedom from Britain in 1957 and gave rise to independence movements in colonized territories. From then, assesses Kenyan historian Bethwell Allan Ogot,

“the field of African history has emerged from a relatively obscure and marginal position among the varieties of scholarship in and on Africa. Its significance and relevance is today acknowledged in universities in Africa, Europe and North America. For instance, in the academic year 1958-59, only one graduate student was studying African history in American universities, out of a total of 1,735 taking history as their majors, By the late 1970s there were 600 professional African historians in the United States, and the number has continued to grow [...] This is a remarkable achievement”⁵.

The increase in interest in African history developed, however, in the midst of debates concerning how to retrieve similitudes of truth in African resources and who has the epistemic privilege to discourse on African history. While it is true that such debates exist in historical projects for other continents, “perhaps no field of historical research and writing has been more shaped, essentially wrought, by the tensions *between* the quest for truth and the search for authority”, than African history⁶.

² Jack Matthew GREENSTEIN, *Mantegna and Painting as Historical Narrative*. Chicago – IL, University of Chicago Press 1992, p. 15.

³ Susan Stanford FRIEDMAN, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. Princeton – NJ, Princeton University Press 1998, pp. 200-201.

⁴ For purpose of convenience in this paper, the terms “African” and “Africanists” are used to distinguish two groups of historians. The first refers to those who were born and lived in Africa itself; the second to those who were born and academically trained outside Africa.

⁵ Bethwell A. OGOT, *History as Destiny and History as Knowledge – Being Reflections on the Problems of Historicity and Historiography*. Kisumu, Anyange Press 2005, p. 61.

⁶ Luise S. WHITE – Stephan F. MIESCHER – David William COHEN, *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History*. Bloomington – IN, Indiana University Press 2001, p. 3.

At the core of this tension is the problem of locating sources for reconstructing the past in most – though not all – of Africa. Compared to the situation in Europe, North America, and even Asia, there is *relative scarcity* in finding written sources from parts of the continent and its peoples. Such a situation can prove to be frustrating for those who espouse the Rankean dictum that historians can deduce or infer the past *bloss wie es eigentlich gewesen war* (simply as it actually happened) by examining hitherto unexamined records and connecting them to each other⁷.

I am personally not a stranger to this situation, having worked with much difficulty in disorganized and poorly furnished diocesan and congregational archives in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. From my conversations with archivists and historians in these places, I got a sense of the lack – but not the absence – of historical consciousness among their people, which should have prompted them to preserve their records of the past or prevent these from being destroyed by fire, termites, or humidity. At times the scarcity of sources has been caused by the lack of appreciation for their future value in particular communities. In one pontifical congregation of African origin, I found out, the correspondence and diaries of the sisters are burned after their deaths. In one of the oldest autochthonous congregations for men, founded in 1945, the archives contained nothing more than seven folders of miscellaneous items which spoke little about the brothers' beginnings.

While one may find a trove of sources in countries like Egypt, Mali, Ethiopia, Morocco and Tunisia, the sad state of many archives in Sub-Saharan Africa could easily discourage and even exasperate any Western trained historian. However, one must be cautious of the frustration these actualities can cause. It can lead a historian to make scathing conclusions, like that of the renowned British historian Thomas Athol Joyce who wrote in 1910 that

“Africa, with the exception of the lower Nile valley and what is known as Roman Africa, is, so far as its native inhabitants are concerned, a continent practically without a history, and possessing no records from which such a history might be reconstructed”⁸.

Years before Athol, however, such sentiments have already been implanted in the minds of many intellectuals because of the following bleak assessment written by Hegel:

“We leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit [...] Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by

⁷ Leopold VON RANKE, *Fürsten und Völker: Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen*. Wiesbaden, Vollmer 1957, p. 4.

⁸ Thomas Athol JOYCE, “Africa: Ethnology”, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1910¹¹, p. 352.

Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History"⁹.

Even in this Late Modern period¹⁰, dismissiveness on the value of doing African history can be heard as when Hugh Trevor-Roper stated that "there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness, and darkness is not the subject of history"¹¹.

Contrary to such negative – if not altogether racist – views, Africa has a history just like every continent does. When historians endeavor to write about its past, however, they have to broaden the horizons of their craft. The *relative scarcity* of written sources from parts of Africa would impel them to approach the past in a more heterogeneous manner.

"African history, perhaps more than other domains of history, has had to be inventive in its use of sources and eclectic in its approach of evidence: (Historians of Africa) draw upon linguistic, archaeological, ethnographic, genealogical, oral-performative, and oral-interview evidence in addition to documentary sources"¹².

My current work as postulator of causes of beatification in South East Asia and East Africa has significantly instructed me on this matter. In every diocesan inquiry, the bishop constitutes a commission of historical experts whose main task is "to search out and gather all the writings of the Servant of God, those not yet published, as well as each and every historical document, either handwritten or printed, which in any way regard the cause"¹³.

While commissions in Southeast Asia could collect a good amount of such proofs, those in Africa tend to come out with fewer documentations even after its members have combed every known archive in the country. In both cases, however, the most valuable information comes from the testimony of trustworthy witnesses, bound by oath to answer truthfully the thoroughly prepared in-

⁹ G. W. F. HEGEL, *The Philosophy of History...*, p. 99.

¹⁰ In this paper, the writer prefers to use the term "late modern" (and its variants) in lieu of "postmodern". He concurs with sociologist Anthony Giddens that the term describes more aptly the dramatic shifts in both social institutions and intellectual life after World War II while the manifestations of modernity continue, albeit radicalized, instead of displaced by a new historical phase labeled "postmodernity". ANTHONY GIDDENS, *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford – CA, Stanford University Press 1991; ID., *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford – CA, Stanford University Press 1991.

¹¹ Hugh TREVOR-ROPER, *Rise of Christian Europe*. London, Thames and Hudson 1964, p. 9.

¹² Barbara M. COOPER, "Oral Sources and the Challenge of African History", in John Edward PHILIPS, *Writing African History*. Rochester – NY, University of Rochester Press 2005, p. 191.

¹³ Congregation of Causes of Saints, *Sanctorum Mater* (2007), art. 68, §2.

terrogatories before members of the diocesan tribunal. It is within these milieux that the predilection of Africans for oral narratives comes out and acts as a fertile ground for data about the past. So long as the interrogatories were formulated with much attention to the minutiae of the Servant of God's life, the oral testimony of the witnesses could fill in or supplement whatever written sources could not substantiate. In the same manner, the trained historian could also verify the truthfulness of these oral narratives by comparing depositions or ascertaining them in the light of the gathered documentary sources.

The significance of the plurality of sources for recovering the past in Africa has caused, however, a certain divide among its historians for the last sixty years. There are those "who would want to endow the content with a historiographical tradition of great antiquity"¹⁴. Nigerian historian E. J. Alagoa asserts that the origin of the tradition could be traced to Egyptian scholarship in 3000 B.C.E.¹⁵. Kenyan historian Bethwell Ogot further argues that

"African history existed from time immemorial, complete with its historians, both official and communal. Even a written historiography existed in Africa from the time of the Old Kingdom in Egypt, c. 3000 B.C.E. By the Middle Kingdom, c. 2000 B.C.E., there was already an institution called House of Life, a place of restricted entry where papyri were kept and which functioned as a kind of university [...] There is no reason why modern Africans cannot study and disseminate the knowledge of hieroglyphics among Africans, since they are an African heritage"¹⁶.

Other eminent African historians like J. D. Fage traced the tradition of historical writing in and about Africa to Herodotus, the acclaimed father of history¹⁷. Senegalese historian Cheikh-Anta Diop would even argue that "ancient Egyptians were Negroes" and Greek civilization was the daughter of Egypt¹⁸.

On the other side of the argument are other historians of Africa, possibly a larger number than the first, who believe that the continent's historiographical tradition is relatively recent, perhaps traceable only to the late 1940s. To them, not even the works of indigenous scholars of the nineteenth century like Apolo Kagawa of Buganda, Jacob Egharevba of Nigeria and John Mensah Sarba of the Gold Coast could be located as the origins of the tradition. Nigerian historian A. E. Afigbo argues:

¹⁴ A. E. AFIGBO, "Colonial Historiography", in Toyin FAYOLA (a cura di), *African Historiography: Essays in Honour of Jacob Ade Ajayi*. Essex – England, Longman 1993, p. 39.

¹⁵ E. J. ALAGOA, "Toward a History of African Historiography", *ODU: A Journal of West African Studies*, 1 (1985) 47.

¹⁶ B. A. OGOT, *History as Destiny and History as Knowledge...*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁷ J. D. FAGE, "The Development of African Historiography", in Joseph KI-ZERBO (a cura di), *General History of Africa*. Vol. 1. London, Heinemann and UNESCO 1981, p. 25.

¹⁸ Cheikh-Anta DIOP, *Présence Africaine*. Dakar, 1974, pp. 233-234.

“It would appear too generous to treat every work that makes reference to, or uses information from, the African past as a work of African history. It is now clearly established that African history must consciously centre on Africa and the Africans. African history is not simply the introduction of African material into the discussion of the experience, the expansion and the achievements of a civilization whose soul and centre lie outside the African continent, no matter how much civilization may have impinged on or impacted upon some portion of Africa or on some groups of Africans. By the same token African historiography is the technique that historians use to write history which consciously focuses on Africa and Africans”¹⁹.

For these historians, then, it would be careless to limit the craft to locating and analyzing the sources of the past in Africa. The more important task lies in the reconstruction of a verisimilitude of the past, the positing of theories that may give meaning to that past, and a reflection of its significant to the present.

The divide on the use of sources among contemporary historians of Africa can be traced to the schools of thought from where their historical enterprises began and to the directions they took after the so-called “linguistic turn” in the 1990s. Schools of historiography in Africa would trace its origins to *Négritude*, a global movement which originated in the mid-30s from the writings of intellectuals with African roots. Leopold Senghor, one of its earliest thinkers, writes about its beginnings:

“Together with a few other black students, we were at the time in the depth of despair. The horizon was closed. There was no reform in the offing, and the colonizers were legitimizing our political and economic dependence by the tabula rasa theory. They deemed we had invented nothing, created nothing, written, sculpted, painted and sung nothing. Dancers perhaps!... To institute a worthwhile revolution, *our* revolution, we first had to get rid of our borrowed clothing – the clothing of assimilation – and to assert our essential being, namely our *négritude*. Nevertheless, *négritude*, even when defined as «the total of black Africa’s cultural values» could only offer us the beginning of a solution to our problem and not the solution itself”²⁰.

Négritude thus became a cultural and intellectual movement, a social and psychological response to Western society’s treatment of and philosophies about blacks which called all of African origin toward a new and unique consciousness.

The African independence movements in the 1950s became the catalyst for *négritude* historians to re-understand their continent’s past, and define what being African meant in the dawn of Late Modernity. Ironically, even if they sought to distantiate from Western assimilation, the intellectual foundation for their enterprise was still influenced by the revolution in ideas in Europe. On the same time that this postcolonial hermeneutics began to emerge, a post-Rankean historiography was beginning to make waves in European colleges that eventually reached the shores of the continent:

¹⁹ A. E. AFIGBO, “*Colonial Historiography*”..., p. 41.

²⁰ Leopold SENGHOR, (1991), *The Collected Poetry, Charlottesville*. University Press of Virginia 1991, p. 102.

“An academic historiography distinct from anthropology and from administrative reports began to take shape from the 1950s largely from the University Colleges that had been created in several colonies – Ibadan, Legon, Dakar, Makerere, Nairobi, Dar-es-Salaam”²¹.

From this development arose the English-influenced “Ibadan School of History” – represented by notable historians like Kenneth Dike, Saburi Biabaku, J. F. Ajayi, E. A. Ajigbo, and J. E. Alago – and the French-influenced “Dakar School of History” – represented by Cheikh Anta Diop, Abdoulaye Ly, Joseph Ki-Zerbo and Djibril Tansir Niane. Although divergent in their foci of their researches, both schools developed themes from the emergent nationalist consciousness and the tactics of resistance in English- and French-speaking Western and Central Africa.

Parallel to these developments are the less conglomerated movements in East Africa. Although uncentered in a specific “school” like their counterparts in West and Central Africa, the works which emerged from that side of the continent strongly advocated for the acceptance of indigenous oral traditions as a legitimate sources for reconstructing the past. Like in the aforementioned schools, the narratives of resistance against colonizers (from the Maji Maji in Tanzania to the Mau Mau in Kenya) formed the crucial matrix where the musings of its historians were born. Such notions about the past in East Africa could be seen in the works of Bethwell Ogot, G. S. Were, M. Kiwanuka, William Ochieng’, Godfrey Muriuki, and Samwiri Karugire.

The above schools sought to create historiographies that reveal a continent united in its struggle against the oppression of colonialism and a glorious past that could have woven the its multicultural threads. But the horrible realities of post-colonial Africa brought into open question the philosophical underpinnings of these schools of thought. Intellectual musings that sought to create a pan-African history could not explain the poverty, tribalisms and corruption that paralyze the continent.

“With the end of colonialism, a shared tragedy that was a platform of unity and national consciousness against a common foe now collapses [...] Without an immediate platform for national consciousness, the unity – hitherto held by common resistance to colonialism – began to give way to tribalism, particularism, intra/intra-ethnic conflict, which supplant the previously held conscious unity. While colonialism presented a common ground for the different ethnic groups to unite, in the wake of its demise, it stripped the newly independent African states of any strong national consciousness and consensus through the diatribe of tribalism. A vacuum was created since unity or nationhood during independence was only a fiction and a product of the colonial logic”²².

²¹ B. A. OGOT, *History as Destiny and History as Knowledge...*, p. 40.

²² Michael Onyebuchi EZE, *The Politics of History in Contemporary Africa*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2010, p. 190.

As if the political instability of the continent were not enough to challenge Late Modern historians of Africa, their historiographies became even more jolted since the notion that history evolves “as document joined document” is no longer tenable²³. The situation affected every community of historians in the world, even though knowledge in both the humanities and social sciences was being transformed by various “post” movements – specifically postfeminism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. Peter Novick articulated the zeitgeist which prevailed at that time:

“At the very center of the professional historical venture is the ideal of «objectivity». It was the rock on which the venture was constituted, its continuing raison d’être [...] The assumptions on which it rests include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to the truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and, above all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation [...] Truth is one, not perspectival. Whatever patterns exist in history are «found», not «made» [...] The objective historian’s role is that of a neutral, or disinterested judge”²⁴.

Throughout the 1990s, the craft of history all over the world was “shaken right down to its scientific and cultural roots”²⁵. What catalyzed this was the irruption in many historians’ consciousness of the “linguistic turn”. Essentially, it implies that human beings do not use language to communicate their thought but, rather, what they think is determined by language. Thus a new understanding of the discipline developed – that “history taken as a whole contains no immanent unity or coherence, that every conception of history is a construct, constituted through language, that human beings as subjects have no integrated personality free of contradictions and ambivalences”²⁶. The jolt was bound to be powerful as

“the subject matter of history – that is events and behaviour – and the data – that is contemporary texts – and the problem – that is explanation of change over time – have all been brought seriously into question, thus throwing the profession... into a crisis of self-confidence about what it is doing and how it is doing it”²⁷.

Yet the fear among historians for much of the decade – including those in Africa – was that the crisis introduced by late modernity would emasculate his-

²³ Ernst BREISACH, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern*. Chicago – IL, Chicago University Press 1994², p. 277.

²⁴ Peter NOVICK, *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1988, pp. 1-2.

²⁵ Joyce APPLEBY – Lynn HUNT – Margaret JACOB, *Telling the Truth about History*. New York, W.W. Norton 1995, p. 1.

²⁶ Georg G. IGGERS, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to Postmodern Challenge*. Middletown – CT, Wesleyan University Press 1997, p. 132.

²⁷ Lawrence STONE, “History and Post-Modernism”, in “Past and Present” 131 (1991) 217.

toriography to “just one more foundationless, positioned expression in a world of foundationless, positioned expressions”²⁸.

While it is true that late modernity caused us to move beyond history’s meta-narrative – i.e., “a Great Past that can be recounted in a single best narrative, the Great Story”²⁹ – the discipline itself did not collapse as we all know. Late modernity, rather, “encouraged historians to look more closely at documents, to take their surface patina more seriously, and to think about texts and narratives in new ways”³⁰. In its most constructive mode, in fact, late modern scholarship

“has helped open up many new subjects and areas for research, while putting back on the agenda many topics which have previously seemed to be exhausted. It has forced historians to interrogate their own methods and procedures as never before, and in the process has made them more self-critical and self-reflexive, which is all to the good. It has led to a greater emphasis on open acknowledgement of the historians’ own subjectivity, which can only help the reader engaged in a critical assessment of historical work”³¹.

Given that present-day historians could no longer labor under the Rankean illusion of objective knowledge, Georg Iggers posits that the most that they could do (and have been doing, as of recently) is to achieve plausibility. He cautions, however, that

“[...] plausibility obviously rests not on the arbitrary invention of an historical account but involves rational strategies of determining what in fact is plausible. It assumes that the historical account relates to a historical reality, no matter how complex and indirect the process is by which the historian approximates this reality”³².

The direction of African historiographies in Late Modernity continues to be debated among its practitioners. To some, the “linguistic turn” is viewed as a phenomenon in Western intellectualism that has no bearing in Africa. But there is a growing generation of younger and global-oriented historians who see any clinging to *négritude* in the 21st century as futile and pointless:

“*Négritude* conjectures a golden age of precolonial Africa from which black people(s) have been separated by colonialism and to which they must now return to. (But) *négritude* has little to say about gender difference and its utopianism is only an ostentatious mark for nativism – a return to tradition but to which tradition?

²⁸ Keith JENKINS (edited by), *The Postmodern History Reader*. London, Routledge 1997, p. 6.

²⁹ James T. KLOPPENBERG, “Review of «*Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse*»”, in *The William and Mary Quarterly* 55, 1 (1998) 135.

³⁰ Richard J. EVANS, *In Defense of History*. New York, W.W. Norton 1999, p. 214.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

³² Georg G. IGGERS, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century...*, p. 145.

The silence on gender difference unveils the mask of tyranny embodied in Négritude as an agent of tradition [...] The nativist appeal of Négritude for a pan-Africanist nationalistic unity, a pseudo continental unity fails because the continent was not united in the past. Négritude so-to-speak, as an authentic pan-African ideology, is not only performatively untrue, but ontologically contradictory”³³.

One can see in these debates, however, that historians of Africa are not that different from those in the West, Asia and Latin America. We are all affected by the intellectual tides buffeting our profession and craft. No one sector can claim that they are far more sophisticated in the way they apprehend and cogitate about the past. Africa, once dismissed by erudites of the West as “a continent without a history”, can proudly state that her practitioners – both African and Africanist alike – have a voice in this global debate about the place of history in the unchartered Late Modern landscape.

³³ M. O. EZE, *The Politics of History in Contemporary Africa...*, p. 131.