

**Journal of Social Sciences (COES&RJ-JSS)**  
**ISSN (E): 2305-9249 ISSN (P): 2305-9494**  
**Publisher: Centre of Excellence for Scientific & Research Journalism**  
**Online Publication Date: 1<sup>st</sup> April 2014**  
**Online Issue: Volume 3, Number 2, April 2014**  
[http://www.centreofexcellence.net/J/JSS/JSS Mainpage.htm](http://www.centreofexcellence.net/J/JSS/JSS>Mainpage.htm)

## **AFRICAN HISTORY AND THE TRADITION OF HISTORICAL WRITING.**

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### **Abstract:**

In the bid to establish the validity of African history and civilization, it is customary for the African scholars to prove that Africa has a long and glorious history before the advent of European colonial masters. Great efforts are usually made to show that this history is worthy of investigation like the history of Europe or that of the United States of America. Although African history has now become a respectable academic discipline in colleges and universities all over the world, it is important to realize that until about six decades ago, Africa was regarded by European historians and historical writers as a continent whose history only began with European intervention in Africa as from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This study examines the European conception of African history and African response to those racist propaganda. Emphasis is laid on oral traditions as a valid and viable source for reconstructing African history and the ongoing trend in the tradition of historical writings in Africa by African and Africanist historians through time.

**Keywords:** African History, Eurocentric View, Historical Writing, African Historians.

**Citation:** Adeoti, Ezekiel Oladele; African History and the tradition of historical writing; (April, 2014); Journal of Social Sciences (COES&RJ-JSS), Vol. 3, No. 2, pp: 317-322.

## Introduction

### European Conception of African History

It is rather unnecessary to make an exhaustive catalogue of European postulates on African history. A few examples will be enough here to give a general idea of the gravity of the attack on African dignity and humanism. European colonial historians and historical writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries believed that Africa was a dark continent and a historical tabula-rasa.' One of such writers was G.W.F. Hegel, a German philosopher. When he was developing his philosophy of history, in a series of lectures in 1830-31, he gave only passing attention to Africa. He divided the people of the world into two historical peoples who had contributed to the development of humanity, and non-historical people who had no hand in the development of mankind. Africa was placed in the latter category. According to him, the history of the world travels from east to west, for Europe is absolutely the end of history, Asia the beginning"<sup>2</sup>. According to him, Africa is no historical part of the world because it has no movement or development to exhibit.

The most widely quoted statement on the absence of history in Africa is that of Hugh Trevor Roper, eminent professor of History, Oxford University. In his inaugural lecture at Oxford in 1962 he said,<sup>3</sup>

*"Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at the present there is none there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness... and darkness is not a subject of history"*.

The pre-literate communities of Africa were considered as primitive and uncreative and could therefore not have made any significant contribution to the world civilization. In fact, any significant achievements in Africa before the European intervention like the great civilization of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia in North-East Africa, the Sudanic empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai, the great artistic break-through of ancient Ife, Nok, Igbo-ukwu and the highly impressive stone structure of Great Zimbabwe in the southern cone of Africa were ascribed to the mythical whitemen, the so-called Hamites, who were supposed to have pioneered cultural development in Africa. This position was postulated as the Hamitic hypothesis or theory by Seligman in 1930. The theory maintains that Hamitic culture and civilization were superior to those of Black Africans, and that wherever there is evidence of cultural attainment in black Africa, be it in the state building, government, architecture and the crafts, the explanation is to be sought in the activities of the Hamites rather than the initiatives of the Blackman.<sup>4</sup>

*"...the civilization of Africa are the civilization of the Hamites its history record of these peoples and of their interactions with the two other stocks, the negro and bushman..."*<sup>5</sup>

The Hamitic hypothesis was used to explain away any important achievements in Africa because the European colonizers wanted to promote the myth of African cultural inferiority because this will help them to justify their occupation and colonization of Africa in terms of a civilizing mission, which must necessarily involve a process of African cultural upliftment. This negative assumption based on a mistaken notion of what constitutes history, was reflected throughout the entire colonial period and it is to be found in the writings and pronouncements of several European pseudo-scientists like Perham, Copeland, Newton, among others.<sup>6</sup> As a result of this, African history like the African peoples themselves was effectively colonized.

### African Historical Writing

It was only in the decades before and after independence that African nationalists and historians began to change this European racist view of African history and to embark upon a systematic study of African oral traditions. This was with a view to meeting the threat to African identity and dignity posed by colonial denial of African past. The history produced took the form of propaganda or what has been aptly tagged “drum and trumpet” glorification of ancient African kingdoms and empires.<sup>7</sup>

One major objection of European historians to African history is the almost universal lack of written records in most African societies before European intervention. Since these Europeans are accustomed to think that “history only begins when men take to writing”<sup>8</sup>, the largely unwritten African past was regarded as the concern of the archeologists and anthropologists and not that of the historian. However, the systematic collection and Progressive use, of African oral traditions within the last five and six decades has shown that African had a dynamic sense of history like other human societies. Invariably, by 1970, it was no longer necessary for African historians to assert the existence of empires and large political organizations in Africa in the past. They know that Africans were not mere spectators in the march of progress. They see Africans as actors in the drama of human development from the beginning of man on earth. These oral traditions, which embody what the traditional historians of Africa remember about the past of their various communities, include not only what is remembered about the activities or exploits of their political, religious or military leaders, but also the rituals and customs of their communities.

Although, these traditions were not written down and preserved in physical structures like modern archives, they have managed to survive because they have been preserved in rituals and re-enactment ceremonies particularly the Installation of new kings. On these special-occasions, some of these traditions were publicly recited and dramatised partly as ritual offerings to ancestor and partly entertainment and education of the people at large.<sup>9</sup>

In many African societies there were even court historians like the Arokin of Oyo, the *Okyeame* of the Ashanti, the *Griots* of the Mande-speaking people of western Sudan, and the *Moaridi* of the Congo, palace drummers among the Akan and *Ihogbe* of Benin whose duty was to guide the political and religious leaders through appropriate education in history. In these societies history was much more functional than in the so-called civilized states of Europe where the study of history is not of crucial relevance to social harmony. In preliterate Africa the knowledge of history-the oral traditions-was usually of great advantage in determining which family or group was entitled to particular offices or territories, among others. Although most of African history is largely unwritten, some parts of the continent possess written records long before the European intervention. Though we have not yet fully investigated the potentialities of the admittedly low cases of local forms of writing in many parts of Africa, it would be unwise to dismiss local forms of writing. The *meroitic script* has still to be deciphered, and Meroc itself is beginning to appear as a major crossroads of ideas between the flowering of ancient Egyptian civilization and the historical development of Ethiopia, the Horn, and the whole of the Western Sudan. Similarly, the *Nsibidi* system of communication that developed in the area of the Cross River and Akwa-Ibom states in Nigeria has not yet been studied. There are also the *Vai script* among the kru people of Liberia and the system created by Sultan

Njoya of Bamun in the Cameroon in the Nineteenth century. In many parts of North, West and East Africa, the spread of Islam and of Islamic education had led to the emergence of a literate class, who wrote down their earlier historical traditions in Arabic. In western Sudan, the two most important of these early historical records are the *Tarikh al Fet'tach* and the *Tarikh al Sudan* in these were recorded the oral traditions of the ancient empires of Ghana and Mali. In Nigeria, the Kano Chronicle also written in Arabic provides formation about the Hausa states during the 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>10</sup>

In East Africa, the Arabic chronicles of *Kilwa* and *pate* also provide information about the city-states during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries to the period of permanent European occupation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The tradition of history- writing which was pioneered by those literate in Arabic was continued during the early years of European occupation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by educated Africans who were largely the products of the new Christian mission schools. In Nigeria, one of the earliest of these historians was the Reverend Samuel Johnson, who completed his famous work - *The History of the Yorubas* - in 1897 after a fairly long period of collecting Oyo Yoruba oral traditions. In other parts of Nigeria, local historians like Jacob Egharevba of Benin and Akigo Sai among the Tiv people have committed the oral traditions of their people into writing.<sup>11</sup>

There were others, in other parts of Africa. In Ghana for instance, Carl Christian Reindorf wrote the History of the Gold coast and the Ashante which he completed in 1889 and published in 1895.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in East Africa, Sir Apolo Kagwa arid S.A. Kiwanuka compiled and wrote the history of the Buganda people of Uganda. The process of collecting and compiling oral traditions and of documenting and interpreting them for the "edification of later generations" especially by the new breed of historians in colleges and universities is still going on.<sup>13</sup> Historians in individual African countries have grouped themselves into professional associations and have published research journals of international repute for sometime. *The Historical Society of Nigeria and the Transaction of the Historical Society of Ghana* have a history spanning over five decades. The Nigerian society of historians also added *Tarikh* a special journal for school teachers and their students. Following the footsteps of Nigeria and Ghana, historians in other parts of Africa-East and the Central Africa-and lately Southern Africa began to wake up.

Francophone West African would appear to have developed historical studies at a slower pace than their Anglophone counterparts. As a way of making up for the lost ground they too took the initiative to form what may be called the nucleus of a continental organization of African historians. In 1974, the association launched its own journal called *Africa Zamani, Reuve, d'histoire Africaine*. The Association however would appear to have failed to bring into its fold the effective participation of the large number of African historians in English- speaking West, East and Southern Africa. However, inspite of its organizational and financial deficiencies, there is no doubt that the contribution of the body is one step forward in the process of decolonising African history.<sup>14</sup>

The UNESCO history project runs under the academic control of an international scientific committee of experts is also a reflection of the progress made so far in the study of African history in all its ramifications. The UNESCO General History of Africa which came in eight volumes reflects the developments by which the major writings and research have shifted from centers mainly in Europe and America to centers in Africa staffed by Africans. Each of the eight volumes has an indigenous African editor. These scholars

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constitute the arrow head of African historiography. Their talents and insights have been tapped. Each volume also has a number of contributors. It is not uncommon finding two or more scholars in the production of a single chapter, although one often finds a scholar especially the volume editor contributing more than one chapter, usually of a general or evaluative nature. Infact, a multidisciplinary approach to writing of African history has been demonstrated in the study as there are experts from several related fields. The volumes on contemporary history or what may be called the more recent period includes the contribution of social scientists and the last volume on independent Africa is edited by professor All Mazrui, a renown political scientist.

The UNESCO initiative has no doubt placed African history in a global setting as each contribution places the history of the locality not in isolation, but in an African perspective and eventually in a world setting. It examines the developments between Egypt and sub-saharan Africa, between Africa and Europe or Asia; just as it focuses not only on the history of Africans in the diaspora but also on African contribution to world economy and civilization. This African initiative should place the new trend in African historical writing on a secure, sound and valid bases.<sup>15</sup>

Undoubtedly, tradition of historical writing in Africa has passed the stage of trying merely to prove a point about the validity of African history or the past breakthrough of African civilization; it has now moved from a combative historiography directed at foreign consumers to a historiography for self education, self-reliance national integration and for the mutual understanding of Africans.<sup>36</sup>

### **Conclusion**

So far, it can be said that the European view that Africa had no history because of the continent's late development in writing was done ostensibly to promote the inferiority of the Blackman to his European counterpart. Indeed, Europeans had always seen Africa as an onlooker in world development. For the Europeans, therefore, Africa is a dark continent that would always be exploited for the benefit of Europe. However, the works of African historians and other writers have not only challenged European's languid view of African history but also thrown up a horde of sources that have proved invaluable in the reconstruction of Africa's past. The validity of African history as expressed in the use of oral traditions and other sources of history has been well recognized and accepted worldwide. These sources when professionally processed, harnessed and harmonized can be more reliable than secondary materials in historical scholarship. In recent times, the use of oral traditions in particular has been embraced by European researchers on Africa history, thus confirming the claim that Africa had a rich pool of valid historical source(s) even before "men take to writing".

### **Notes and References**

1. See for example Professor A.P. Newton's 1923 assertion that Africa South of the Sahara had no history before the coming of the Europeans. Quoted in S.A. Akintoye, *Nigerian Contributions to Black History*, Nigeria Magazine 115-116, 1975, p. 110
2. George Wilhem Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, New York, Dover, Publications, 1956.
3. This famous phrase is from Professor H.R. Trevor Roper, "The Rise of Christian Europe", *Listener*, London, November 28, 1963.
4. See, C.G. Seligman, *Races of Africa*, London, 1930 (later editions), 1957, 1966; Edith E. Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis: Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective", *Journal of African History (JAH)*, Vol. 1, No. 4, (1969), pp. 521-532.
5. See E. J. Alagoa, "The Python's Eye: The Past in the Living Present", University of Port-Harcourt Inaugural Lectures, Harrison Pub. Coy, 1981, p. 17
6. The Late 19th Century was the high-water mark of European Imperialism. The period also witnessed the vulgarization of science in the hands of the social Darwinian theorists and anthropologists who supplied the much needed intellectual justification for the imposition of European rule on so-called "weaker races" of the world.
7. See E.J. Alagoa, *The Python's Eye...*, 1981, p. 19
8. See Nigeria Magazine 115-116, 1975, p. 10
9. See Jan Vansina, *Oral Traditions: A Study in Historical Methodology*, London, Penguin, 1965; also, Jan. Vansina, "Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba" in *Journal of African History*, 10, 1960, pp. 46-53.
10. West Africa has had a very long tradition of historical writing/scholarship dating back to the advent of Arabic writing from the 9th century onward.
11. See E.J. Alagoa, *The Python's Eye...*, 1981, p. 18
12. Olufemi Omosini, "Carl Christian Reindorf: His Contributions to, And Place in the Development of Modern African Historiography", Department of History, University of Ife Seminar Papers, 1979-80, p. 2
13. The task was first placed on a firm scholarly footing by Jan Vansina in his seminal, work, *Oral Traditions: A Study in Historical Methodology*, published in French in 1961 and in English in 1965.
14. See George G. Igger and Harold T. Parker, (eds.), *International Handbook of Historical Studies: Contemporary Research and Theory*, (n.d.)
15. George G. Igger and Harold T. Parker (eds.), n.d.
16. E.J. Alagoa, *The Python's Eye...*, 1981

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