

SILENCES, ERASURES, AND THE END OF HISTORY: DOING AFRICAN HISTORY IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION (Panel)

Who Owns African History?

The production of academic knowledges about the African pasts took place in the context of decolonization---the formal dismantling of the imperial domain. African historians, primarily the Nigerians who took the lead in this historic enterprise, were confronted with the Herculean task of producing historical knowledges for a group of people who were seen by the hegemonic other as lacking any history /sense of history. The colonial matriarch of the moment Dame Margery Perham defined Africans in racial terms: a collection of primitive tribes with no clothes, no brick wall dwellings, no major historical monument, and therefore No History! This Hegelian ex-cathedra was to be reproduced a decade later by Hugh Trevor Roper. The monumental/ pioneering task of producing and recovering the collective pasts of the different peoples of the continent were shaped by a conscious othering of cultures and peoples which found expression in a powerful and rigid binary: those with history versus those without! The immediate collective responses from African historians, and their Africanists colleagues---non-Africans who study Africa--- were simply to demonstrate that Africa had a glorious past.

Affirming and documenting the existence of a glorious past, and producing historical knowledges for the nation-states in the making became the two most distinguishing features of the new historiography. African historians, not Africanists, took the lead in defining the field. Yet fifty years later the story is completely different: African historians are marginal to a scientific field of enquiry that supposedly produces knowledge about their societies. This marginality raises the question of ownership: who owns African academic history? And for whom is it being produced?

Long before it became fashionable in academic circles to question the legitimacy of knowledge produced by outsiders, Africans and other colonized populations had raised troubling questions about the possibility/ impossibility of understanding and representing them to other cultures. The representation of Africa, Columbus-style, which emerged in the context of colonialism, survived the demise of formal colonial domination. It was reproduced in not so subtle forms with refinements here and changes there in studies dealing with non-hegemonic cultures and peoples. Inherent in this missionary project is a simple but powerful claim of superiority versus inferiority founded on colonial/post-colonial power and arrogance. The description and representation about other cultures affirms the power and dominance of the imperial other; it is the colonizer and the native once again, who, in the immortal words of Fanon, know each other just too well. It is also about the outsider (observer) and the native (observed) as much as it is about defining and representing a particular group of people to the world. Africans, whether in the Diaspora or in the continent, remain the only group of people whose academic historians are predominantly non-Africans.

The representation of Africa by outsiders and the hierarchical othering of cultures and peoples therefore compel us to pose vexing questions---theoretical, empirical, ethical and moral--- even if we cannot provide immediate answers, about the knowledge that is being produced about 'peoples without histories!' Some of these questions revolve around the nature of the historical knowledge being produced about Africa by non-Africans in the Euro-American academy and the resultant exclusionary conversations (debates?) about Africa in which Africans do not take part. The narrativization of this exclusion constitutes a significant portion of the fifty-five years story of African academic history. Thus Cheikh Anta Diop is written out of history; Egyptian civilization rooted out of Africa; the European slave trade declared an unprofitable commercial venture; and colonialism pronounced a non-hegemonic project. It is such nuanced nonsense that Jacques Depelchin, a veteran practitioner-cum-activist historian, or what the French would call an intellectual engage, sets out to capture in *SILENCES!*

Is studying Africa the same as writing for Africa? When does writing about Africa become speaking for Africa? Who should speak for the African past(s) and in what manner? These were some of the questions that a young Nigerian, Kenneth Dike, the first to graduate with a doctorate in African history, was trying to answer when he wrote a rejoinder challenging the racist formulation of Dame Perham. This was in 1953, two years after he graduated from London University. The editors of West Africa magazine agreed to publish his rejoinder but had to remind him that the proofs were to be shown to Dame Perham before publication! This encounter between a young African graduate looking for an outlet to publish her/his views and an indomitable racist was to be reproduced hundred fold in subsequent years. In the words of J.F. Ajayi, another Nigerian historian, it simply meant that the new African historiography had to be acceptable to the West; legitimacy for the new discipline had to come from the imperial citadel of learning; the business of history or knowledge production and validation was too important to be left to the colonized to handle or manage. Decolonisation or independence would not translate to freedom of thought. In the context of the cold war, it meant anything but that!

As Depelchin shows again and again in *SILENCES*, it is not enough to talk about sources and methodology; it is just not enough to continue to bemoan archival sources or belabor the point that such sources overwhelmingly recount the deeds of victors. Africanist historians would do better if they take seriously the injunction that they come from the dominant and dominating cultural milieu (read power), whose very existence is much at odds with the production of an emancipatory history capable of speaking to the complex issues of individual and collective survival that has shaped the existence of the colonized/post-colonial world since it was constituted almost six hundred years ago.

The minimum pre-condition for the emergence of such history is the creation of an African scientific space that would transcend and subvert what Depelchin calls paradigmatic silences: silences that are difficult to detect because they are framed in such a way that they evade crucial theoretical questions. Such project would not only confront the resultant collateral damage that such silences spawned—which range from a denial of African contribution to civilization to the refusal to acknowledge Africa authorship in the sphere of knowledge production—but also nurture an epistemological rigor to combat the widespread culture of impunity practiced by 'Africa's most dangerous marabouts'.

How do we begin to write/right these wrongs in an age of so-called globalization wherein peoples of different and diverse cultures are calling for and demanding that they own their history? Does demand for ownership undermine intellectual rigor and scholarship? What is the relationship between history, memory, ownership and colonialism? What would become of the holocaust story if that history were to be written by Nazi sympathizers/German historians? How would the Intifada be presented if that history were to be written in Tel Aviv? Can we entrust the history of genocide to genocidaires? What would become of European history if it were to be written predominantly by Africans or other colonized peoples? What would the history of America be from the standpoint of Africans/the indigenous peoples? These questions revolve around issues of ethics in academic/professional history, the morality of knowledge production, and the democratization and ownership of knowledge. *SILENCES* deals with these and other questions that are central to how we can begin to imagine an emancipatory discourse anchored on centuries of exploitation and popular resistance.

This is a book about academic violence; collective intellectual denial; culpable erasures; and deliberate omission. But it is also about emancipation and liberation; for it explores the complex linkages between historical knowledge and our collective freedom.

The challenges facing African academic history are multifaceted. They range from a lack of an acceptable definition of the field, to the selection of research topics/ appropriate research questions as well as developing a well funded research program with a regular journal and monograph /anthology series through which African scholars can publish their research findings. The above is compounded by the chronic lack of funding for historians---donors are not interested in historians who are seemingly concerned with the past--- as well as the seeming unpopularity of history as a field of study. Undergraduate students are more interested in so-called professional courses than in the study of history. The dwindling enrollment in undergraduate programs is a continent wide problem that has resulted in the collapse of some graduate programs; very few students are interested in pursuing a graduate degree in history. Not only are there more non-African graduate students studying African history, there are increasingly more non-Africans studying African history. With the possible exception of South Africa, African graduate students have over the years elected to stay in Euro-America after completing their studies. The brain-drain phenomenon continues to deepen the crisis around the production of historical knowledges on/about Africa.

The most important challenges facing the survival of African history as an academic discipline concerned with the study of Africa and Africans are two fold: the rise and popularity of community based history anchored on oral tradition and everyday life and the emergence and dominance of post-structuralism/cultural studies representing Africa. The later has tended to overshadow the binary between history produced by Euro-Americans for their consumption and history produced by Africans resident in Africa for local consumption.

But academic history in Africa is not only besieged from without by the Africanist enterprise, it is also currently on the retreat internally. The drop in enrollment in colleges is not only an economic response to the neo-liberal assault on tertiary education, but also an affirmation of the widespread notion that there is nothing to be gain from studying history. After all, so it is argued, we live it and there is nothing any professional can tell me/us about my/our individual or collective pasts. The challenge from popular history is urban-specific, rooted in groups and communities, and it appears mostly as lyrics or alternative conversations presented as counter-discourses. They range from the subtle and not so subtle and are normally deployed in conflict situations to explain everyday occurrences such as forced eviction on public/private property, unnecessary police harassment, inter/intra community clashes as well as outright confrontation with state power. The conversations taking place in areas of violent clashes in Nigeria, Kenya, the Great Lakes are revealing of this new trend. The narratives from these communities are not only totally at odds with the prevalent conventional academic history but they also tend to subvert them.

Consider the explanation of a second-generation squatter turned landlord in a suburb in greater Freetown about how he acquired the land on which he had built a house. That his father used to hunt in the said land for decades was simply enough to make an initial claim! When asked about the conveyance, he quickly pointed out that he had a statutory declaration--a document acquired to establish legal claim. It did not matter to him whether the land originally belonged to someone else or whether the land tenure law in the hinterland, from whence he came, differs from the one in Freetown. His narrative about his land can be read as an alternative conversation about everyday life that is totally at odds with the hegemonic discourse. Capturing the multiple dimensions of this emerging genre constitute a major challenge to African historians. Is the merging of the popular and the academic the way forward? Or should we privilege the popular over the academic? These are not rhetorical questions; they begin to open up an alternative reading/explanation for the incessant conflicts in Africa----a dialogue between the written past and the unwritten present.

Africanists scholars, 'Africa's most dangerous marabouts,' to use a Mazruiana, are undoubtedly the dominant voice in the production of African academic history. They not only outnumber their African colleagues, but they also set the intellectual agendas /'scholarly' debates; they control all the major journals and book series on African history. How they study Africa or approach their areas of scholarly interest inevitably influence the choice of topic or approach for the ever-expanding army of new recruits. It is therefore not uncommon to have intellectual district commissioners, like their colonial predecessors, protecting their fiefdom after the academic partition of African history in the post-colonial period. Thus Klein and Robinson are to Senegal what Ranger, the sole patriarch, is to Rhodesia/Zimbabwe; Last and Lovejoy are to Northern Nigeria what Lonsdale and Illiffe are to East Africa. And the list is endless! The academic partition and scramble over Africa is not restricted to struggle over territories. It is also about who has the right to pontificate on what theme/subject. Who then owns African academic history?

Long before different versions of post-modernisms became fashionable among historians, the numbers of research projects dealing with any area or subject in African history before 1800 were few. The colonial period, defined as Africa from 1880 to the present, was the most popular. Even the Curtin-Vansina School in the US noted for its pre-colonial bias produced graduates who worked on colonial Africa. The so-called middle age of African history, so christened by Roland Oliver, 1500-1800, was relatively neglected. And the earlier periods--1000-1500, African pre-history--attracted very few students. Today very few Africanists or Africans are interested in the history of Africa before 1800. Here then is a major challenge for African historians: the need to study the early history of the continent, which no longer interests Africanists. The hegemony of post-modernist enterprise in the reconstruction of the African past is at the expense of serious scholar work on the history of the continent.

African historians cannot afford the license to engage in useless conversations affirming the non-existence of the African past nor can they afford the liberty to pontificate on the imaginary thin line between fact and fiction. It is either that the Olduvai Gorge exists or it did not. There are no two answers to the question. Defining the field of inquiry is as important as the methodologies to be employed in capturing that past. The initial consensus about the history of the 'dark continent' became less tenable as Africanists and their African colleagues embraced the racist notion of Africa south of the Sahara (left out North Africa and South Africa), and concentrated solely on what became known as Black Africa. The problem of definition poses new problems and challenges in the current era of intense interaction between and amongst peoples of diverse cultures engendered by the new communication and Cultural Revolution. Should academic history in Africa be about Africans on the mother continent or should it be about peoples of African descent wherever they are? Who is an African or a person of African descent? When does the Diaspora cease to be a Diaspora delinked from the continent? Is the Diaspora a perpetual enclave from without tacked on to a continental land mass that is still struggling to (re) define itself in relation to itself/ others? Such questions are important not least because they touch on the complex and seemingly intractable problem of identity: race and nationality/ethnicity. To resolve this problem of definition with a tentative answer that Africa is neither black nor white nor brown is to beg the question of what really constitutes Africa.