

AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE CHALLENGES OF EUROPEAN PERIODIZATION: SETTING THE RECORDS STRAIGHT

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ABSTRACT

African historiography set by the Europeans has claimed that there was little or no impact of the Africans in creating Africa's history. Africa's history was said to have begun with the history of the Europeans in Africa. With this mind-set, in creating what they called Africa's history tended to focus on events that coincided with the intrusive European explorers rather than events antedating them. The brief paper, in the face of this problem, analyzes the thorny issue of African historiography. In doing this, it adopts the primary and secondary sources of data collection with historical method of data analysis. It submits that there seems to be a lacuna in the periodization of Africa's history, especially with respect to the indigenous people's contributions. The structure of African historiography had more to do with the European expeditions than African experiences. It recommends that Africa's history should be periodized in such a way that the multiple fragments of the African past, cultures, languages, religions, philosophies, and cosmology are taken into account in order to represent the peculiarities of the continent's history.

INTRODUCTION

African historiography has been following divisions, schemes, and sequences set by the Europeans who in the past claimed that there was no such thing as Africa's history and that the history of Africa began with the history of the Europeans in Africa. With this mind-set, in creating what they called Africa's History, the early Eurocentric historians periodized it in sequences as they thought fit and proper. Thus, periodization in African history tended to focus on events that coincided with the intrusive European explorers rather than events antedating them. This appears to be a lacuna in the periodization of African history, especially with respect to the continent's past before Western contacts. The structure of African historiography had more to do with the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade than with African experiences. Africa's history should be periodized in such a way that the multiple fragments of her past, cultures, languages, religions, philosophies, cosmology, arts, aesthetics, music, dance, warfare, architectures, farming, astrology, rituals, navigation, crafts, industries, etc. are taken into account in order to represent the peculiarities of the continent's history.

Ihediwa (2022) asserts that the periodization along the lines of centuries has left a lot to be methodically captured, and this has created a gap in Africa's historiographical scholarship. The paper intends to re-examine African historiography and reveal the gaps in the periodization

scheme of Africa's history. It also makes a case for the restructuring of Africa's historical periodization in line with aspects of Africa's past not deeply investigated and structured in the scheme of history. We shall look at the process of recreating African history and its precursors and look at the periodization of Africa's history and its shortcomings and make potent suggestions on the way forward.

THE PITFALLS OF AFRICA'S HISTORIOGRAPHY

Africa as a continent is full of diversity, seen arguably in every facet of life; as a result, over time, diverse interpretations have been given to Africa's realities and circumstances. Archaeological finds in East Africa posited Africa as the cradle of human life, and historical evidence has shown that Africa once stood as a gateway to “awesome civilization”. Writing African history in general has been challenging and mostly difficult, due to a lack of both comprehensive written records and holistic archaeological evidence that covers all the zones of Africa from past times. This has left Africa's historical scholarship in the hands of foreign adventurers, sailors, writers, and amateur historians, most of whom never ventured beyond the coastal fringes of the areas of Africa they visited. Unfortunately, the history of Africa tended to focus on the activities of two groups, the Arabs and the Europeans in Africa. This situation produced a medley of confusion in African historiography, as African history was written merely from the bird's-eye view of aliens and, second, was sequenced following patterns of historical developments outside the continent. The consequence was that Africa's historical sequences became jumbled, and externalities not congruent with trends in Africa's past and realities shaped her historical timelines. (Seligman, 1966).

Some European authors had assailed and even doubted Africa's historical heritage; Trevor-Roper (1963) for instance even went as far as to say, “Africa had no history prior to European exploration and colonization, that there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness.” Africa's past, according to him, consists of nothing but “unedifying gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe” (p. 871). Even Hegel (1956), in an apparent attempt to besmirch Africa, once asserted that “Africa is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit” (p. 99). Denying the association of a whole continent with any kind of civilization, Seligman (1966) wrote brazenly that the “civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites, its history is the record of these peoples and of their interaction with the two other African stocks, the Negro and Bushmen” (p. 96). What he was positing here is that the other two “races” were incapable of achieving anything without the Hamitic influence. His espousal of the myth of the superiority of light-skinned people was only a part of the European prejudice ubiquitous in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

These trenchant remarks about Africa's past all arose as a result of the inclination of a section of humanity to debase and denigrate another. The absence of written records in much of Africa posed a great challenge to the historical reconstruction of her past, and this was what spurred African scholars to evolve and insist on the use of oral history in reconstructing it, not minding the gaps inherent in this medium.

It is common knowledge that colonialism had very negative effects on every conceivable aspect of Africa's life. Even before full colonialism, Africa had suffered under the weight of the European rampage epitomized by the Atlantic slave trade. This trade lasted for more than four centuries and saw the despoliation of the continent, denuding it of its future and prospects. There was no gap between slavery and colonialism; thus the ravage continued, leading to many distortions of Africa's realities. The writing of Africa's history by Europeans initially meant that

they wrote from their perspectives on Africa and what they thought would fit, and not essentially about Africa's past realities. Africa's indigenous historical scholarship did not emerge until well into the twentieth century, when some students from various African states, privileged to get higher education outside Africa, began to return home and teach in a few institutions of higher education that had been set up by the respective colonial powers. It was through this medium that African history was rediscovered. In those few universities that existed in Africa, African history was not taught and never existed in the curricula; it was simply overshadowed by European and American histories. African nationalists fought against this trend in higher education, and the intellectuals of African extraction who returned took up the challenge to develop courses on African history. The same was the case for African philosophy, which, according to Western philosophers, had never existed.

In this struggle to recreate African history, Liberia had opened one university way back in 1864 and Sierra Leone opened one in 1876. These universities began to admit and train African students in the few disciplines existing back then, including history. The battle for the creation of African historiography thus began with the return of African intellectuals who had gone to study in Europe and America and who now entered academia in their home countries. The first venture towards the “de-Europeanization” or “de-Westernization” of Africa's history was the creation of courses on aspects of African history and the writing books on African history, thereby creating a platform for the development of indigenous African historiography. This first stage, to an extent, set the course for reordering African history, but did not completely restructure the existing timelines that had been imposed from outside. (Ihediwa, 2022).

RECONSTRUCTION OF AFRICA'S PAST

Afigbo (2004) in his work noted the European attitude toward African history which was shaped by exploitation and domination; to legitimize European despoliation of the continent, everything primitive was associated with the continent; even slavery and colonization were justified as means of “civilizing” or “Christianizing” the “primitive people” (p. 46). Hence, it is no wonder African nationalists and the Pan-Africanist movement worked toward the reconstitution of Africa's heritage through the study and writing of Africa's history by Africans. In this sphere, Nkrumah (1964) retorted that their “efforts marked a renaissance of scientific curiosity in the study of Africa and should be directed to an objective impartial scrutiny and assessment of things Africa” (p. 10). In the beginning of African church historiography, for instance, leading African historians discovered that Greeks, Romans, and Arabs had written about the emergence Christianity in Africa long before Europeans and Americans penetrated the continent. From a truly scientific impulse, they were insightful in understanding the realities in Africa. But in the era of slave trade and colonialism, the Europeans had the desire to denigrate the continent and justify exploitation, domination, and colonialism (Afigbo, 1984).

It was this distortion and exploitation of Africa's realities and her past that actually birthed what we have today as African historiography. Though handicapped by the availability of genuine written sources, particularly in places like south of the Sahara, the African historians made frantic efforts in reshaping the of Africa's past which detractors in the likes of Hegel and Trevor-Roper, leveraged the absence of written sources to demean.

To this end, Nkrumah (1972) asserts that the wave of nationalist and Africanist consciousness coming up in the 1940s and 1950s produced vibrant and articulate historians who championed African history and studies of Africa, which eventually produced novel scholarship on Africa's past and encounters. This movement was also supported by nationalist leaders in Africa;

prominent among them were Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, Leopold Seder Senghor of Senegal, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, and a host of others. Interestingly, Kenneth Dike was on hand to direct the emerging struggle to recover and reshape the soul of Africa's historical scholarship, among other peers in West Africa and other parts of black Africa. Ihediwa (2022).

Azikiwe (1996) in his post-independence writings inspired many on African historiography, especially during the anti-colonial campaigns. Dike (1956) on his part marked a turning point in the study of history in Nigeria and indeed in Africa in general. Dike's writings blazed the trail for African studies and historiography, and constituted a major breakthrough in realizing his earlier dream of a rebirth of African historiography using oral history for the reconstruction of Africa's past for the first time.

In other parts of Africa, the reconstruction of its past was also on-going. Apart from North Africa and East Africa, where Arab influence had permeated and where written records of the past existed on an appreciable scale, oral sources and archaeological evidence began to be aggressively deployed in Africa's historical reconstruction. In this period, Africanistics emerged, a radical new development in the study of African history and culture by Africans themselves, a step forward toward a new African historiography.

DIKE'S ROLE IN REDISCOVERY OF AFRICA'S PAST

Dike's major role was on the rediscovery of Africa's past, and a re-orientation of the world's attitude to African continent and its past. Dike's research and publications had a deep impact on Africanist scholarship; more like removing a veil and unlocking Africa's door to her history. Soon researchers began to publish wonderful accounts of various aspects of African history, through the use and deployment of oral evidence. The publication of Dike's *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* inspired more than eight books dealing with aspects of both the pre-colonial and the colonial history of Nigeria. It awakened the use of oral interviews as a substitute for written and archival records where these latter did not exist. The publication of Dike's book and his other papers stimulated the study of history as a discipline among Nigerians and, indeed, in many other African countries, especially at a time when Africans had formulated their resentment of colonial domination. In Nigeria, the study of history became so popular that the country had the highest number of distinguished Africanist historians in Africa at the time.

Thus, Dike's publications marked the beginning of radical historical scholarship inside Africa that took oral traditions as its source for the reconstruction of Africa's past and redefined the study of the continent's church history without European endorsement or acceptance. In his work, Dike looked at the relationship between European traders and the African middlemen in the Niger Delta area. He discovered that European traders and missionaries, who wrote about their trading and missionary activities, usually downplayed the role played by their African counterparts in their interactions. Attempts made to discredit oral sources as useful tools for the reconstruction of the history of preliterate societies in Africa collapsed under the weight of this new Pan-Africanist consciousness and movement of historical rebirth.

Dike believed that subjecting oral history to systematic criticism and supplementing the resulting residue with evidence from written documents after the fashion of Western historiography, as well as with evidence derived from archaeology and other ancillary historical sciences would put old-style African history through a process of rebirth (Afigbo, 1984).

Dike had developed a two-pronged approach from the purview that African history must be the history of African peoples and not merely the history of their invaders from Europe and Asia, and

studies of European contacts in Africa, where European archival materials remain the major source, should focus on the role played by Africans in the events that have shaped the continent (Dike, 1965).

Dike's efforts as a pioneer in African history later yielded the desired dividend with the emergence of many Africanist historians who pushed further the frontiers of African historiographical reconstruction. This led to the production of eight volumes of Africa's history sponsored by the UNESCO. Each of the eight volumes of UNESCO's General History of Africa covered sensitive areas and timelines and was edited by specialists drawn from across the African continent. The chapter contributors were experts in the areas they wrote about, which gave the volumes the strength and authority they command. The authors of these chapters largely used oral evidence, archaeology and cultural and linguistic evidence to support their positions and arguments, thereby strengthening the new theory in African historical scholarship as championed by Dike (Ihediwa, 2022).

It is not surprising then that Mathar M'bow (1981) derided the Eurocentric prejudices toward African history and how they concealed the true history of Africa from the world at large. He further observed that “although the Iliad and Odyssey were rightly regarded as essential sources for the history of ancient Greece, African oral tradition, the collective memory of peoples which holds the thread of many events marking their lives, was rejected as worthless” (p. 23). He went on to state that, since the European Middle Ages were often used as a yardstick, modes of production, social relations, and political institutions were visualized only by reference to the European past.

Martha M'bow's position was how to promote and sustain the tempo of historical research and documentation ignited by indigenous Africans. Here, the effort was supposed to deepen through access to archaeological excavations across Africa and by restructuring existing periods used in African history, especially local indigenous history of African societies. African historians fell short of defining what historical periods should be conceived for Africa and how events should be periodized to show radical departure from a Western template on periodization. This has happened only in a very few areas of core African local histories.

AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY VIZ-A-VIS EUROPEAN PERIODIZATION

Periodization as a concept is a way of ordering ideas or events to fit into sequences of occurrence. According to Shaw (2010), “Periods and events are concepts that organize our understanding and knowledge of the past.” Stearns (1987) sees periodization as a European construct created as a “conceptual tool that makes change over time a manageable topic, and therefore history teaching feasible. For Bloch (1953), “Periodization is a strategy historians use to represent change and continuity”; he sees it as a central challenge historians face. Berkhofer (2008) has also observed that “historic time like all time must be divided in order to be told”. African historiography still has one more hurdle to cross, the hurdle of periodization.

African history in the post-colonial order emerged as a result of a relentless struggle by indigenous African historians to restore it to its true status, and that struggle will continue until an acceptable timeline is created for events from the remote past of Africa. After the UNESCO publications, more attention was directed to archaeological explorations across Africa. This is very important, because a lot is still hidden under the surface of Africa. Prior to the Atlantic slave trade, African states had had diplomatic contacts with some European states; examples include the Kingdom of Benin in Nigeria and the Chiefdom of Warri in the present Niger Delta of Nigeria. Warri developed a relationship with Portugal in the fifteenth century. This was over three

hundred years before the British colonization of Nigeria. There are incongruities in the periodization of African history, especially in this case.

Archaeological discoveries across Africa since the 1960s have revealed much about Africa's past. In Nigeria for example, the 'Igbo Ukwu finds' in the 1960s show that a dynamic Igbo culture and civilization based on a kinship system had flourished there since about 800 AD, long before the Norman conquest of England. This is not captured in the current periodization scheme in African history. The pasts of many other societies in Africa as revealed through archaeological excavations do not benefit from the current periodization scheme in Africa (Ihediwa, 2022).

There is nothing specifically wrong in setting out periods or phases in history, but the challenge is when such a periodization is not autochthonous and does not incorporate the broad course of events in Africa as a continent. There should be no hard and fast rule about periodization. African historiography still faces this challenge. Examples abound where historical timelines for local history in West Africa begin in 1800. By 1800, European contacts were established in many parts of the continent, but this was hardly the beginning of the local history of the people. In Nigeria, there is a local course called Igboland since 1800, which implies that the history of this people did not commence until 1800. It belies the struggle for the reconstruction of African history when the periodization of local history almost coincides with the informal engagement of the Europeans with the indigenous peoples. Therefore, the call for historians in Africa, particularly south of the Sahara and in the forest belt, is to intensify their efforts in archaeological research and the probing of the remote areas of Africa to recover the hidden past. African history should be the history of events in Africa and narrate the forces that shaped those events since antiquity; the idea of a periodical structure in African history should be worked out in line with the sequences of developments in the continent on a case-by-case basis, not necessarily following pre-existing European models. The indigenous calendars and numerical scales should be incorporated into the periodization of the different histories of groups in Africa; this will create a departure from the existing periodization scheme that weighs more on Eurocentric scales.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the periodization of history in Africa as overshadowed by European timelines and periodization scales. The paper notes that African historical scholarship cannot submit totally to the Eurocentric format of historicizing events in Africa; it opines that Africa should devise her own scales and periods to accommodate her peculiarities and challenges. It also examined the emergence of African historiographical scholarship, particularly in Africa south of the Sahara, by looking at the roles of pioneer African historians like Kenneth Dike, who insisted that African history should be about events in Africa and the forces that shaped those events.

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