

# Chapter 1

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## The Study of Africa in Historical Perspective

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### Introduction

Africa's place as a prime contributor to the history of human development and civilization is generally accepted today. Across the ages, the continent played host to diverse cultures and striking civilizations. For instance, Africa was the home of such enduring civilizations as Kush, Aksum, and ancient Egypt in the Nile Valley. Indeed, ancient Egypt is believed to be the world's longest-lasting great civilization, enduring for well over two thousand years. In the Western Sudan, Ghana, Mali, and Songhai flourished as great empires. Great Zimbabwe was a magnificent civilization in southern Africa.

Nineteenth-century European scholarship questioned the now undisputed fact of Africa's contribution to human progress. In the Eurocentric intellectual tradition of that period, precolonial Africa was conceived as a "dark continent" which neither contributed to civilization, nor was touched by it. In European thought, as we shall see, Africa was painted as immersed so deep in barbarism and chaos that it could not have left in its past a history of any significance. Africa was thus defined out of history.

Of course, it would be overstating the fact to conclude that the Eurocentric conception of Africa as a "dark continent" does not exist any longer. The notion of an Africa with wild animals and dark jungles still lingers in many minds, untutored in the truth of the Africa past. Yet to many people—those who are sufficiently interested in an objective and critical study of Africa, scholars who have been involved in research into African history and are aware of the facts—the validity of Africa's historical past is no fresh news. The ever-growing bulk of scholarly literature on African history based on an array of sources that include written records, oral tradition, and archaeological evidence, have established the subject as a valid enterprise in intellectual inquiry. Indeed, since the mid-twentieth century, such great strides have been made in the historical study of Africa that today African history constitutes an integral part of the broader history of civilization.

This chapter will attempt a critical examination of how Africa has been conceptualized in the history of ideas across the ages, and how the study of its history

has changed over time. It will discuss salient issues such as the antiquity of African history, historical consciousness, and the preservation of history in pre-colonial Africa. The chapter will also examine racism and the Eurocentric conception of Africa, the evolution of Africa-centered perspectives of history as represented both in the continent and in the diaspora, and the rise of recent conceptual frameworks such as Afrocentrism.

## The Idea of History

Contrary to the Eurocentric thought that denied Africa its history, the continent has a rich historical past dating from long before the advent of Europeans. Africans had always had a clear conception of history and a notion of the past as a tangible reality worthy of preservation. What were the essential characteristics of historical reality among Africans prior to European contact?

First, history was conceived as the knowledge not only of the past, but also of the present. Historical processes in Africa, as in some other cultures of the world, were seen as a continuum stretching from the earliest times to the present. The present was an uninterrupted continuation of the past, and a bridge to the future. Hence, history involved the study of all aspects of society's past and present behavior. It was the study of people in their environment and of the institutions that govern their relationship with others—social, political, economic, and religious.

Second, Africans were also conscious of the historical significance of occurring and recurring events. The idea of history was of such paramount importance that every effort was made to preserve it for future generations, although not in a written form. Much of the historical preservation was accomplished through oral tradition. Today oral tradition constitutes an important historical source for the reconstruction of precolonial African history.

The beginning of oral history in Africa can, perhaps, be dated to the origin of African communities themselves. Africans preserved their history via various forms of oral tradition, as verbally communicated histories. The forms include myths and legends, folk tales, poetry, proverbs and riddles, praise songs, praise names, and religious and secular songs. Oral tradition could also be in form of enactment such as ceremonies and rituals. Whatever the form, oral tradition provides historical information about aspects of the history and culture of African peoples. Myths and legends, for example, often contain useful information about the origin of states and communities, the evolution and development of social and political institutions, the nature of religious and economic activities, and diplomatic relations between communities. The validity of traditional history as an authentic source of reconstructing African history is no longer in question. African historians have demonstrated through research that oral tradition can provide accurate historical accounts and when properly handled, can constitute an invaluable source for reconstructing history. Thus, as precolonial African history has shown, a lack of archival tradition does not preclude the existence of history. Oral preservation was ultimately the bedrock of history, and such history transmitted down the generations by word of mouth is no less valid than as if it were written. A great deal of the oral tradition of many African societies has now been reduced

to written form by scholars. As will be shown, much of the written historical literature on many African societies owes a great deal to traditional accounts.

The third essential characteristic of precolonial African history is that it had a definite purpose. History was not an abstract concept. It was not a purposeless acquisition of knowledge of past and present events. Rather, history was relevant, having a purpose necessary for the survival of a community's traditions. History primarily served as a socializing agent, playing a vital role in day-to-day living, particularly in the education of the individual. History, therefore, constituted the pivot of the socialization process. It was a means through which every person was educated in the codes of conduct of the society, in the norms, values, and ethics of the culture. It was through the knowledge of history that each community defined itself and its relationship to other communities. History provided the basis for the appreciation and understanding of the institutions of the society, and for the smooth functioning of such institutions.

## **The "Dark Continent": Eurocentric Conception Of Africa**

The conceptual idea of Africa as a continent without civilization or significant historical achievement was principally a by-product of the rise of racist scholarship in Europe. It was essentially a creation of Western thought and a Eurocentric framework of explanation. In the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, pseudo-scientific, racist postulations gained prominence in European thought and defined the black race as inferior. "Scientific racism," supposedly derived from empirical research, depicted people of African race as genetically inferior to Europeans. Lacking an understanding of African ways of life, Europeans saw African culture as backward, lagging behind in the march toward progress which other cultures had already made. Thus, unable to appreciate the complexities of the cultures of Africa which were different from those of Europe, Western thought simply concluded that the continent was still in the dark ages. Hence, Africa was a "dark continent."

The propagation of this racist and negative stereotype of Africa and its peoples was largely the handwork of Europeans who wrote about Africa. Some of these Europeans were travelers, explorers, traders, and missionaries who visited Africa and wrote accounts of their visits and their perception of the continent<sup>1</sup>. But their perception was marred by racial prejudice. They labored to represent the continent as a land of wild animals, and its people as primitive, incapable of building a civilization. This conception of Africa is vividly expressed in Lord Chesterfield's Letter to His Sons, published in 1901. In it, Lord Chesterfield wrote:

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1. For instance, as a result of his visit to Africa, explorer Henry Morton Stanley wrote *Through the Dark Continent*, originally published in London in 1899, by G. Newness. The book displayed the typical stereotype of Africa and Africans.

The Africans are the most ignorant and unpolished people in the world, little better than the lions, tigers, and leopards and other wild beasts, which that country produces in good numbers.<sup>2</sup>

The propagation of the "dark continent" stereotype of Africa was not confined to Europe. It was no less virulent in the racially segregated United States, especially in the south. Popular writings, motion pictures, and of course, racial theories produced by white Americans reinforced this stereotype. American popular literature in the form of books, magazines, journals, pamphlets, and comics, as well as film and stage presentations, constantly propagated the idea of an Africa irreparably lost in barbarism. These constituted the principal avenues by which most Americans form their ideas about Africa.

The pseudo-intellectual basis for the "dark continent" ideology was provided by scholars engaged in supposedly critical discourse on the cultures and peoples of Africa. Historians, anthropologists, and ethnologists produced "scholarly" works that denied the reality of African history, thus lending credence to the idea of a "dark Africa" before its penetration by Europeans. The basis for the denial of an African past by European scholars was the apparent lack of written records in much of the continent. Margery Perham, British political commentator, put this succinctly when she declared that "until the very recent penetration of Europeans the greater part of the continent was without... writing and so without history."<sup>3</sup> In essence, in Western intellectual thought, the period before the advent of Europeans in Africa was prehistoric.

Western scholars not only agreed that African history started at the point of European contact with Africa, they also agreed that such history was that of the white man in the continent. Before the colonial era in Africa, the European conception of African history was nothing more than a catalogue of activities of Europeans in Africa. It was the history of Europeans' travels, hunting expeditions, trade, and missionary activities. Africans were often invisible and were rarely featured within their own history. References to Africans were often derogatory.

Nevertheless, as Africa entered the colonial era the need to write African history that was more focused on the people became apparent. Imperial authorities felt that for colonial policy to succeed, the histories of the indigenous peoples must be known. In Nigeria, for example, colonial administrators such as Lord Lugard and Sir H.R. Palmer urged subordinate officials to compile notes on the history of Nigerian groups. The efforts to commit to writing aspects of the histories of the subject peoples led to the writing by colonial officials of an African history that was at least not entirely preoccupied with European activities.

Although colonial officials were the most prolific of those who wrote about Africa in the colonial period, a number of works were also produced by other proponents of and apologies for colonialism. Even while focusing on African peoples, the premise of colonial historiography was still basically racist and hegemonic. In the colonialist literature, the negative stereotype of Africans was still

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2. Quoted in Robin Hallet, *The Penetration of Africa: European Enterprise and Exploration Principally in Northern and Western Africa up to 1870*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), 37.

3. Margery Perham, "The British Problem in Africa," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1951: 638.

very much espoused by European writers. They stressed and romanticized the alleged backwardness of Africa and depicted Africans in horrifying terms. In a description of the people of southern Nigeria, for example, Maurice Bruce referred to them as "superstition-ridden people of the coast" who indulged in the "horrors of human sacrifice and cannibalism."<sup>4</sup>

By propagating a negative image of Africa, the colonialist historiography sought to justify the presence of Europeans in the continent. They argued that it was the dismal situation in Africa that prompted Europeans to embark on a civilizing mission. A British historian, D.G.O. Ayerst, alleged that frequent wars and outrageous slave raiding in Africa were some of the reasons which "made the people of Europe ready to undertake what they regarded as a civilizing mission in Africa."<sup>5</sup> In the same vein, King Leopold of Belgium was said to have been so moved by the terrible condition of the people in Africa that he called a conference at Brussels in 1876 where a charitable international African association was formed with the aim of civilizing and saving the people of the Congo. While purporting to write the history of African peoples, the overriding intention of the colonialist historiography is clear. It was an attempt not only to establish the validity of the European presence in Africa, but also to legitimize the colonial subjugation of the continent. European colonial officials and their imperialist collaborators wrote "African history" in a way that attempted to justify colonialism.

European colonial writing did yield a large volume of works on Africa, especially from colonial officials. Although these works were ostensibly histories of African peoples, they were in reality no more than pseudo-anthropological studies. Indeed, many of these writers still had the pre-conceived idea that a historical study of African peoples could not be undertaken.

Perhaps the most important legacy of the Western idea of Africa articulated in the literature produced from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries was that it laid an enduring foundation for the sustenance of the "dark continent" ideology. The legacy of this ideology is so profound that it has never totally disappeared. Even at a time when Western historical tradition had begun to accept the validity of authentic African history, the noted British historian, Hugh Trevor-Roper, still held on to the myth of an Africa without history. Trevor-Roper stated in an article published in 1963:

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 Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness... and darkness is not the subject of history.<sup>6</sup>

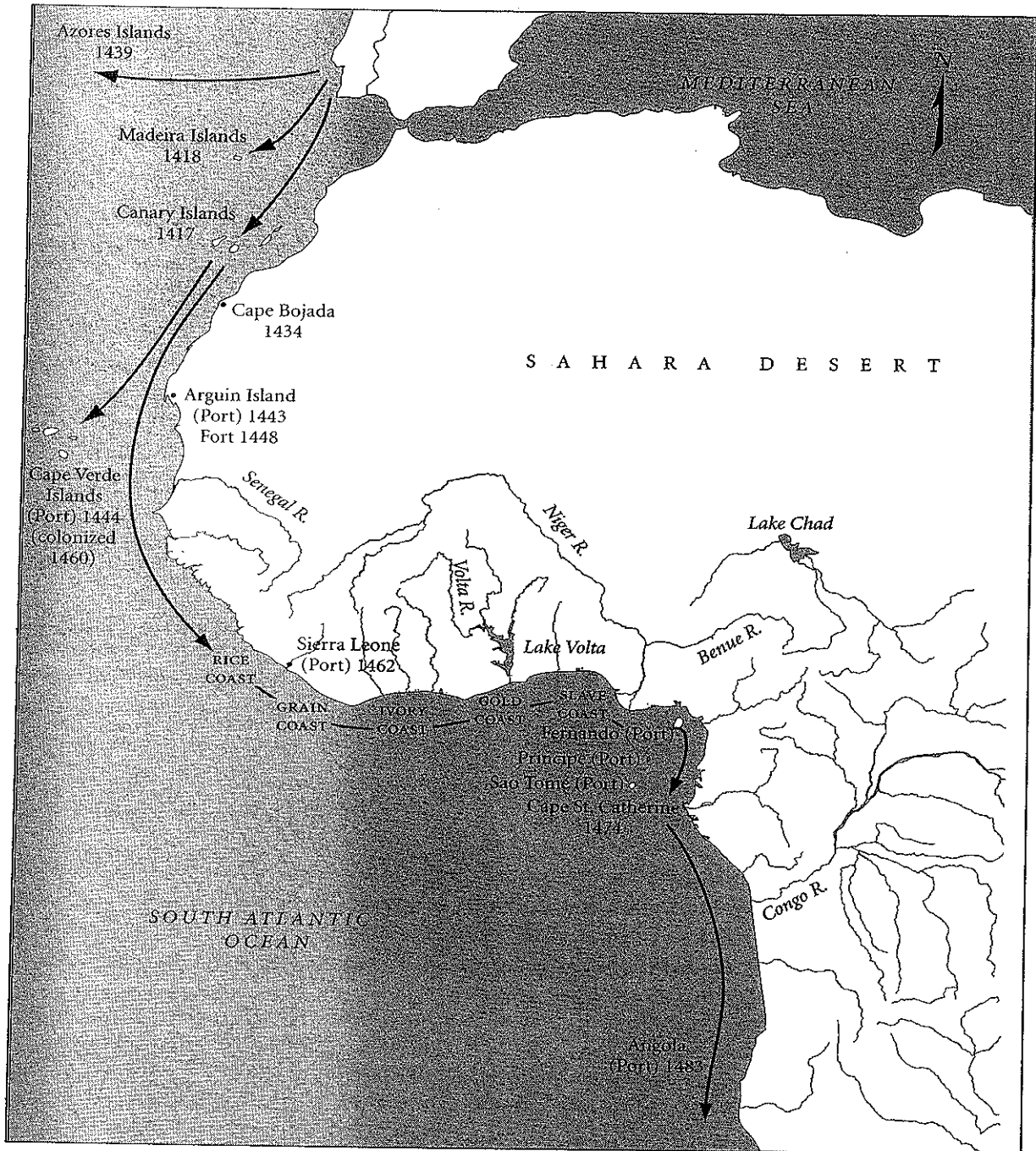
During the public school desegregation fight in the United States in the 1960s, white opponents of school integration borrowed ideas from the racist assumptions of the "dark continent" ideology. Henry Garret, a college professor, expressed his opposition to integration by noting that "over the past 5,000 years, the history of black Africa is blank" and since, in his opinion, Africans did not

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4. Maurice Bruce, *The Shaping of the Modern World, 1870-1939*, vol. 1 (London: Hutchinson, 1958), 605.

5. D.G.O. Ayerst, *Europe in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), 294.

6. Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Rise of Christian Europe," *The Listener*, 28 November, 1963.



**Figure 1-1. Portuguese Exploration of West Africa**

contribute to civilization because they “had no written language; no numerals; no calendar or system of measurement,” there was no basis for the integration of white and black children.<sup>7</sup> Despite the great strides that have been made in the knowledge of Africa today, the idea of Africa and Africans is still colored by the “dark continent” stereotype.

7. Quoted in Sanford J. Ungar, *Africa: The People and Politics of an Emerging Continent* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 23.

## The Rise of Africa-Centered Perspectives of History

### Local Histories

During the colonial period when Europeans were busy writing their own version of African history, local African historians were writing their own version as well. The distinction between European and African colonial historical literature was obvious, based primarily on the purpose of writing and the perspective adopted. While European writers approached their subject from a framework that is basically Eurocentric, local African historians wrote from the African point of view. In essence, it was African colonial writing that began the tradition of the Africa-centered perspective of history.

It is important to recognize who the local historians were, and their motivation for committing to writing the histories of the indigenous African peoples and societies of which they wrote. The local historians were literate Africans who, during the colonial period, felt the need to write the history of their people.<sup>8</sup> Their medium of expression was not limited to the European languages alone. Apart from English, French, and other European languages, they wrote in Arabic and in various African languages as well. For them, there were two main motives for writing the indigenous histories of their people. First, they wanted to establish the fact that African societies had a vibrant history before the European incursion into the continent. They wanted to prove that these societies were custodians of historical achievements. The local historians were in effect the first to revolt against the Eurocentric idea of an Africa detached from history.

Second, local African historians were inspired to write by patriotic motives. They saw the preservation of the history of their communities as necessary in order to avoid the risk of its being completely forgotten. Writers fired by patriotic motives sought to commit to writing the history and culture of their people that was being threatened by the growing influence of Euro-Christian culture and civilization. This motivation is clearly expressed by Samuel Johnson, an example par excellence of a local African historian. In his *History of the Yorubas*, a monumental work on the Yoruba of Western Nigeria which was published in 1921, Johnson stated:

Educated natives of Yoruba were well acquainted with the history of England and with that of Rome and Greece, but of the history of their own country they know nothing. This reproach is one of the author's objects to remove.<sup>9</sup>

The importance of African colonial writing has not often been well appreciated. This is probably because the local writers were not historians trained in the techniques and methods of scholarly study. Indeed, they lacked the techniques

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8. Notable among them were Samuel Johnson of Nigeria, Carl Reindorf of the Gold Coast (Ghana), James Africanus Horton of Sierra Leone, Apolo Kagwa of Uganda, and Otomba Payne of Nigeria.

9. Samuel Johnson, *History of the Yorubas* (Lagos: C.M.S., 1921), preface. For a study of Samuel Johnson, see Toyin Falola, ed., *Pioneer, Patriot, and Patriarchy: Samuel Johnson and the Yoruba People* (Madison: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1994).

such as the systematic collection of source materials and critical evaluation and interpretation of evidence. In most cases, the works they produced, which were mainly ethnographic, relied heavily and almost exclusively on oral traditions. As a result of their lack of academic training, at least by western standards, the collection and evaluation of oral tradition could hardly pass the test of the rigors of historical scholarship.

Nevertheless, colonial African historiography represented the pioneering effort to achieve an African perspective. Unlike the European writers, who lacked a basic knowledge and understanding of the history and culture of African communities they wrote about, local African historians were very much at home with their subject. Being proficient in the language of the culture of which they wrote, and having a unique relationship with the community, they stood at a better vantage point than their European counterparts. Thus, despite its demerits, colonial African historiography laid the groundwork for authentic African history. Its interpretation of historical events introduced a new approach to the analysis of African history. The pioneering works of the local historians became so valuable that modern academic historians have had to depend on them as a useful source for their more authoritative academic studies. Therefore, in terms of contribution to the development of the study of African history, these local historians were no less important than the academically equipped African historians who were to take over from them the mantle of producing a more Africa-centered history of the continent in the postcolonial period.

## **Academic Histories**

The study of African history entered a new phase in the closing years of the colonial period. By the 1950s, the era of the struggle for independence in Africa, this new phase had begun to take shape. It was an era that saw not only the decolonization of Africa but the decolonization of African history as well. For the first time the study of African history was elevated to a pedestal of intellectual discourse. It became a credible subject of academic pursuit.

What is the basic characteristic of academic historiography? As opposed to popular literature, it is the writing of history based on scholarly research findings. Such history has to be a product of an elaborate methodology that insists on thorough investigation of issues with a view to arriving at a creditable conclusion. Sometimes, this methodology calls for the employment of the tools of other disciplines. The results of research in academic history are disseminated through the publication of books, journals, and monographs.

The development of the scholarly study of African history in the 1950s and 1960s owes a great deal to the establishment of institutions of higher education in many parts of Africa. In West Africa, the University College of Ibadan, (later to become the University of Ibadan), was founded in Nigeria in 1948. In the same year, the University College of the Gold Coast, (which later became the University of Ghana) was established at Legon, Ghana. Both universities paved the way for other institutions in Anglophone West Africa that emerged in the 1960s. These included, in Nigeria, the University of Nigeria at Nsukka (1960), the University of Lagos (1962), and the University of Ife (1961), (renamed Obafemi Awolowo University in 1987). In Francophone West Africa, a higher institution in Senegal became the University of Dakar in 1957 (later renamed Cheikh Anta Diop Univer-

sity). In Cote d'Ivoire, the University of Abidjan was established in 1964. In East Africa, notable early institutions were the University of Nairobi in Kenya, established in 1956, and the University of Dar es Salaam, in Tanzania, founded in 1964. Makerere University in Uganda, originally a technical institution established in 1922, became a full-fledged university in 1970.<sup>10</sup> In these institutions, students received training in the techniques of academic history. Although many of the institutions had no courses in African history during this early era, they still produced some of the leading African historians who were later to champion the academic study of African history. Thus, this small circle of African scholars, some of who had pursued specialized studies leading to doctorate degrees, was to become a formidable force in the creation of academic historiography in Africa.

When these highly trained scholars took faculty positions in African universities, they were confronted by departments of history where the curriculum was still basically Europe-centered. For example, at the University College of Ibadan, an affiliate of the University of London until 1962, students studied mainly European and British history. According to one of the pioneers of academic historiography in Africa, J.F. Ade Ajayi, by November 1950 the only courses available at the university were in British history, European history and the history of the colonization of Africa.<sup>11</sup> The reason for the focus on Europe in the curriculum had to do with the teaching faculty which was dominated by Europeans. Western historical scholarship had not yet fully accepted African history as fit for academic enterprise.

But the nonexistence of African history in the history curriculum of the African universities was always unacceptable to the few African teachers. This small group, therefore, called for a reorientation of the history syllabus in order to truly serve the purpose of the history department in an African university. At Ibadan, this effort was led by Kenneth Dike, who has been described as the "father of modern African historiography."<sup>12</sup> Within a relatively short period, Ibadan had begun to offer courses in African history.

After the curriculum had been transformed with the infusion of courses in African history, the next challenge was the availability of suitable textbooks. African scholars realized that they could not rely on books written by European writers with Eurocentric perspectives to teach African history. They realized that if they were to sustain and effectively teach the new courses in African history there was an urgent need for books written by Africans from African points of view. One of the earliest books to emerge out of this effort was Kenneth Dike's *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885*, published by Oxford University Press in 1956. The publication of this book was an important landmark in the evolution of academic historiography and the development of Africa-centeredness in the writing of African history. The book not only opened the gate for further publications by African scholars, but, more importantly, it demonstrated beyond any doubt the usefulness of local sources in historical research. Oral tradition had

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10. Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone, founded by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1827, was the forerunner of these institutions. However, initially it was no more than an institution designed to train the clergy.

11. J.F. Ade Ajayi, "Towards a More Enduring Sense of History: A Tribute to K.O. Dike," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, LXII, nos. 3 & 4 (1984-1985).

12. *Ibid.*

never been accepted as a valid source of historical reconstruction by European writers, but Dike's work proved this fallacious. The book, in fact, came out of Dike's doctoral dissertation—one of the first dissertations partly based on oral tradition to be accepted by a British University. In a review of the book, the Manchester Guardian concluded that:

The period has been written on from the British side. Dr. Dike gives a lucid and convincing account of it from the African side... It is an important contribution to commonwealth history, perhaps the most penetrating and mature study so far contributed by an African scholar.<sup>13</sup>

Complementing Dike's book was S.O. Biobaku's *The Egba and Their Neighbors, 1842-1872* published in 1957, a year after Dike's. With both books, a solid foundation had been laid for a host of other scholarly works written by African academic historians to follow.<sup>14</sup>

By the mid-1960s, a course of study in African history had been clearly and firmly established in African universities and other tertiary institutions. The study of various aspects of African history from prehistory to modern times was adequately supported by a growing number of textbooks written by African scholars. A number of European Africanist historians including Basil Davidson, Thurstan Shaw, Thomas Hodgkin, J. D. Fage, Michael Crowder, J. D. Omer-Cooper, A. F. C. Ryder, Robin Law, Roland Oliver, and many others also produced highly acclaimed books on African history.

One of the dimensions of the growth of academic study of African history in African institutions was the emergence of various schools of thought such as the Ibadan, Legon, Makerere, and IFAN (Institut Fondamental de l'Afrique Noire) schools. The contributions of these schools to the development of the study of African history cannot be overemphasized. Their primary concern was the development of a scholarly research program in the history and cultures of Africa, and also a data resource collection to aid this program. The Ibadan Historical School, for example, devoted its resources to researching the precolonial and colonial history of Africa in general, and that of Nigeria in particular. It began a program of research leading to monographs—namely the Ibadan Series. An impressive number of scholarly texts came out of this series.<sup>15</sup>

The Legon, Makerere, and IFAN schools also followed the tradition of Ibadan in scholarly research and documentation of African history, and in publishing research findings. The Legon History Series produced outstanding books dealing primarily with precolonial Ghana, but also with various other aspects of African his-

13. Quoted in *Nigerian Year Book* (Lagos: Government Printer, 1959), 111.

14. A good example of such works is J.F. Ade Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite* (London: Longman, 1965).

15. A few examples of these works include Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (New York: Humanities Press, 1967); Obaro Ikime, *Niger Delta Rivalry: Itsekiri-Urhobo Relations and the European Presence, 1884-1936* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969); S.A. Akin-toye, *Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland, 1840-1893* (London: Longman, 1971); R.A. Adeleye, *Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria, 1804-1906: The Sokoto Caliphate and its Enemies* (London: Longman, 1971); B.O. Oluruntimehin, *The Segu Tukulor Empire* (London: Longman, 1972); and P.M. Mutibwa, *The Malagasy and the Europeans: Madagascar's Foreign Relations, 1861-1895* (London: Longman, 1974).

tory.<sup>16</sup> While the primary attention of the Makerere school was on the history of East Africa, that of IFAN was on Francophone Africa. All these schools of thought devoted their resources to developing research into the history of African peoples.

As a way of enhancing scholarship, African scholars also established professional bodies such as the Historical Society of Nigeria and the Historical Society of Ghana. These associations held annual conferences where scholars came together to present academic papers. The associations also sponsored academic publications which became one of the avenues for scholars to disseminate the results of their researches. For instance, the Historical Society of Nigeria began to publish the *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria and Tarikh*.

Since the 1956 publication of the trail blazing *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*, the volume of works on virtually all periods of African history and all regions of the continent has increased tremendously. It is due to these works that the academic study of African history has been firmly established and its rapid growth ensured. Unlike the ethnographic and superficial analysis of Africa by the early European writers, and the non-critical, story-type accounts of the local chroniclers, the historical scholarship produced from the late 1950s has laid a proper claim to academic history. Its qualification is based on its careful and critical research methodology.

One important product of the tradition of academic history in Africa is that it has given new interpretations to themes treated previously from a Eurocentric perspective. Old themes have been revisited and reinterpreted and new conclusions arrived at. Much of the credit for this revision can be ascribed to a strand of academic historians which emerged in the 1970s. These had a different orientation from their predecessors who were pioneers of academic African history. Many of them, influenced by the radical technique of political economy, adopted a Marxian approach in their analysis of African history. While the early set of scholars succeeded in establishing the validity of the academic study of Africa, the new cadre of African historians revised, redefined, and reinterpreted African history.

The colonial and postcolonial history of Africa has particularly received the attention of revisionism. Political economic historians have argued that to explain colonialism as a progressive theme in African history, as it was characterized by European scholarship, is to trivialize, or fail to see in its totality, the complex nature of the colonial experience. On the contrary, revisionist historians argued that colonialism effectively impoverished Africa while it developed Europe.<sup>17</sup> These scholars have drawn a casual connection between European imperialism and underdevelopment in Africa. Their analysis repudiates the claim of contemporary modernizers that the West is the universal model of modernism; that new states, including emerging African states, must look toward the industrialized nations of the West and borrow their values in order to develop. Rather, the radical African historians have consistently argued that the emerging states possessed the internal dynamics necessary for development. To them, indeed, modernization or development is a product of internal dialectics or class struggle, and is not attainable through the acquisition of foreign values. Scholars of this persuasion, in fact, be-

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16. An example is M.A. Kwamena-Poh's *Government and Politics in the Akuapem State, 1730-1850* (London: Longman, 1973).

17. See the series of essays in Toyin Falola, ed., *Britain and Nigeria: Exploration or Development?* (London: Zed Books, 1987).

lieve that the alliance of some African states with the West is the foundation of their continued underdevelopment.<sup>18</sup>

## Afrocentricity

The study of African history received an important boost from outside the continent in the 1960s. While the tradition of academic history was being developed in the continent in the opening years of the 1960s, African Studies as a discipline was beginning to emerge in American colleges and universities. Within this new discipline (sometimes referred to as Black Studies or African-American Studies), African history became an important component.

The impetus for the rise of African Studies was provided by two momentous events of the early 1960s. The emergence of sovereign states in the continent led to a gradual change in perception of the continent by African-Americans who had hitherto held the Eurocentric view of barbaric Africa: The result of the new perception was to engender a renewed interest in the history of the continent.

The U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s also contributed to the rise of African Studies. Although the movement was principally a struggle for civil rights for Black America, one of its important intellectual legacies was the inclusion of African history and culture in the college curriculum. The demand for civil rights by African-Americans went hand in hand with the insistence that the history of Africa be incorporated into the learning process. Consequently, courses in African history began to be widely offered in colleges across the United States, either taught within an African Studies program, or as a unit of the curriculum in the history department.

In the last thirty years, African Studies as an academic discipline has matured so well in the United States that it has become a leading discipline in academia. Not only has it made tremendous growth quantitatively (going by the number of African Studies programs), it has also made significant qualitative strides. Perhaps more than the proliferation of programs, it is its qualitative growth in terms of the development of theoretical frameworks of analysis that confers legitimacy on it as an academic discourse.

Theory building and the formulation of conceptual frameworks have, indeed, been a part of the development of African Studies. Afrocentrism (sometimes called Afrocentricity) is perhaps the most controversial paradigm for the study of Africa to have come out of the Black intellectual tradition in recent times. This concept, which has gained currency particularly among many Black scholars in the United States, is conceived essentially as a critique of European hegemony in scholarship. Molefi Kete Asante, the leading scholar of the Afrocentric paradigm, states that "my work has increasingly constituted a radical critique of the Eurocentric ideology that masquerades as a universal view."<sup>19</sup>

The hegemonic character of the Eurocentric mode of explanation, Afrocentric scholars contend, is necessarily detrimental to the study of the history of Africa,

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18. One of the greatest apostles of this idea was the Guyanese historian, Walter Rodney. See his *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1972), 6.

19. Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 6.

and that of its diaspora. Within the Eurocentric tradition, Afrocentrists argue that the black historical experience is presented as a by-product of European culture and therefore tangential to the historical process. The effect of this is that Africans and peoples of African descent are precluded from having a sense of the historicity of the African experience, and of the contributions of blacks to human civilization.

What is the theoretical grounding of the Afrocentric theory as a paradigm for historical inquiry? The Afrocentric method of history, as conceptualized by its main proponents, is predicated on a central theoretical assumption. This is that, for a historical analysis of the African world to be meaningful and valid, it must begin with Africa as the core of discourse. In other words, Afrocentrism places Africa at the nucleus of any scholarly exposition of African history. In the Afrocentric philosophy, such exposition must derive its intellectual foundation from ancient Egypt, believed to be the first human civilization to attain greatness. Ancient Egypt, (or Kemet as is frequently referred to by Afrocentrists), thus becomes for Afrocentric scholars a classical reference point for the study of Africa. One Afrocentric historian, Tsehloane Keto, articulates this when he argues that "an Africa centered perspective of history cannot be sustained without its connection to the African culture of Ancient Egypt."<sup>20</sup>

The claim of ancient Egypt as a classical reference point for African history is not entirely new. It was Cheikh Anta Diop, the Senegalese historian and Egyptologist often regarded by Afrocentrists as their "intellectual ancestor," who first laid the groundwork for reclaiming ancient Egypt for Africa. Diop's major work, *The African Origin of Civilization*, is devoted to proving that the "ancient Egyptians were Negroes," and that "ancient Egypt was a Negro civilization."<sup>21</sup> This is a teaching that contradicts the popular wisdom of Western scholarship. But to Diop, the making of the ancient Egyptian civilization was the work of Africans. It is thus appropriate and necessary to connect African history with ancient Egypt. Diop argues:

The history of Black Africa will remain suspended in air and cannot be written correctly until African historians dare to connect it with the history of Egypt... it will be impossible to build African humanities, a body of African human sciences, so long as that relationship does not appear legitimate.<sup>22</sup>

Afrocentrism, as a theoretical contribution to the historiography of African history, has not escaped virulent criticism. The bone of contention does not appear to be the philosophical foundation of the paradigm. Not many critics would quarrel with an approach which insists that the study of Africa must be carried on within a perspective that places the continent at the center stage of analysis. Indeed, to many scholars there is nothing particularly new about this call for centeredness in the study of Africa. Much of the scholarship about Africa since the 1960s is considered Africa-centered in perspective.

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20. See Tsheloane Keto, *The Africa-Centered Perspective on History* (Blackwood: K.A. Publications, 1989), 23.

21. Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth and Reality* (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1974), xiv.

22. *Ibid.*, xiv.

The controversy over Afrocentric history rather has to do with methods and claims. Afrocentrists have stressed the primacy of classical Egypt in the study of Africa. The utility of this is that the linkage with ancient Egypt provides intellectual muscle to African studies the way classical Greece provides an inspiration to scholarship about Europe. However, there has never been a consensus among scholars of antiquity that ancient Egypt was an authentically Black African civilization as claimed by Afrocentrists. At best, some scholars have contended that ancient Egypt was a racially mixed culture, and that the Egyptians themselves were not racially conscious as modern society is.<sup>23</sup>

There are other Afrocentric claims about Ancient Egypt that irk opponents of the theory. Afrocentrists posit that the source of Egyptian culture can be located somewhere further south of Egypt, in Black Africa. As well as this, a dimension of Diop's thesis, to which many Afrocentrists also subscribe, is that classical Greece is a product of ancient Egypt. In other words, Egypt was the mother of the ancient Greek culture, the progenitor of European civilization. Therefore, by implication, Europe owes its civilization to Africa. Diop craftily points this out when he asserts that "instead of presenting itself to history as an insolvent debtor [the] black world is the very initiator of the western civilization."<sup>24</sup>

The thesis of the Afrocentric scholars about ancient Egypt received a great boost with the publication of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*.<sup>25</sup> Bernal, a Cornell professor of government, offers strong evidence of ancient Egypt's influence on ancient Greek civilization. Bernal argues that Eurocentric writers have over the centuries, deliberately left such evidence unacknowledged in classical studies. However, while most scholars of the classical world would agree that ancient Egypt did influence classical Greece, they would contend that such influence was minimal, that it was not fundamental to the building of Greek civilization.<sup>26</sup> Others would argue that both Egypt and Greece had mutual influences on each other; that it was not a case of one-way traffic whereby the Greeks wholly obtained or "stole" their art, philosophy, religion, and science from the Egyptians.

The rebuttal of the Afrocentric interpretation of history, in the final analysis, rests squarely on what many critics regard as its subjective claims. These, they note, are reflected not only in the fundamental Afrocentric claim about ancient Egypt, but also in other hypotheses. One of the basic claims of Afrocentrism which critics regard as historically baseless is the assertion of the presence of Africans in the American continent before Christopher Columbus. Again, Diop appears to be one of the first scholars to express these "possibilities of pre-Columbian relations between Africa and America."<sup>27</sup> But Ivan Van Sertima, a Rutgers' scholar and an authority on African civilizations, has been at the forefront of this subject. In 1976, Ivan Van Sertima published *They Came Before*

23. See for example, Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

24. Diop, *African Origin*, xiv. See also Asante's works, *Afrocentricity* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1988), 38-39; and *Kemet, Afrocentricity, and Knowledge* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990).

25. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

26. This idea is also articulated in Lefkowitz's *Not Out of Africa*.

27. Diop, *African Origin*, xvii.

Columbus: The African Presence in America, in which he forcefully argues the black presence in America prior to Columbus' voyage. He finds evidence in "practically every field of study" including botanical, linguistic, cartographic, oceanographic, skeletal, epigraphic, and also eyewitness accounts.<sup>28</sup> Many Afrocentric scholars accept Ivan Van Sertima's postulation of a black presence in the Americas before Columbus.<sup>29</sup> However, this theory has not been widely accepted among students of American history.

For critics of Afrocentrism, the central element of critique is the question of intellectual objectivity. To many, the Afrocentric project is manipulative of history, ideologically motivated, and designed to serve a political end. Many scholars have accused Afrocentrists of creating "myth as history," in order to realize a political agenda of replacing the white superiority doctrine with a black model. One critic, Diane Ravitch of Teachers College, Columbia, concludes that "Afrocentrism intends to replace the discredited white supremacy of the past with its equally disreputable theory of African supremacy."<sup>30</sup>

Despite the criticism of Afrocentrism, it has become a formidable presence in the historiography of Africa and the diaspora. It is making a great impact on the academic environment, particularly in African-American intellectual circles. Indeed, an increasing number of black scholars continue to regard Afrocentrism as the way toward the rescue of African and African-American Studies from peripheralization. Leading scholars of the Afrocentric theory spare no effort to correct what they regard as the misconceptions of their critics. They argue that there is nothing ethnocentric or hegemonic about the Afrocentric model. Asante concludes that "it does not valorize the African view while downgrading others."<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

The history of the idea of Africa was shaped by misconceived European thought. Unfortunately, this thought, the "dark continent" conception, dominated the terrain of scholarship for a long time. It has, nevertheless, been exploded by almost half a century of historical writing about Africa. Today African history is known not to be a recent phenomenon which originated with the coming of the Europeans to the continent. The historical consciousness and recognition of the functional purpose of history clearly evident in Africa prior to European contact have been acknowledged. African history is as old as African communities and peoples.

The writings on African history produced in the last half century have ensured that no longer will the African past be treated as a unit of European explo-

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28. See Ivan Van Sertima, "African Science Before the Birth of the 'New World,'" *The Black Collegian*, January-February 1992: 70-71.

29. See for example, Molefi Kete Asante, "Toward an Afrocentric University," *Africa and the World*, no. 1s (1988): 49.

30. Diane Ravitch, "Multiculturalism: An Exchange," *The American Scholar* 60 (1991): 267. Also expressing the same idea is Arthur Schlessinger's *The Disuniting of America* (New York: Norton, 1992).

31. Molefi Kete Asante, "Multiculturalism: An Exchange," *The American Scholar* 60 (1991): 270.

ration, commercial enterprise, or missionary activity. In fact, so great an advance has the study of Africa made that today it constitutes a distinct academic discipline offered in universities and colleges across the world.

## Review Questions

1. What elements characterize the idea of history in precolonial Africa?
2. Examine the concept of Africa as a "dark continent." What was the basis for this view?
3. Discuss the contribution of local chroniclers to the development of African historiography. In what ways did they differ from academic historians?
4. Explain the part played by the establishment of institutions of higher learning in historical writing in Africa.
5. What are the basic tenets of Afrocentrism as a paradigm for the historical study of Africa? Examine the criticisms of the theory.

## Additional Reading

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