

AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY: From colonial historiography to UNESCO's general history of Africa

Bethwell A. Ogot

Since the later 19th century, the study of African history has undergone radical changes. From about 1885 to the end of the Second World War, most of Africa was under the yoke of colonialism; and hence colonial historiography held sway. According to this imperial historiography, Africa had no history and therefore the Africans were a people without history. They propagated the image of Africa as a 'dark continent'. Any historical process or movement in the continent was explained as the work of outsiders, whether these be the mythical Hamites or the Caucasoids.

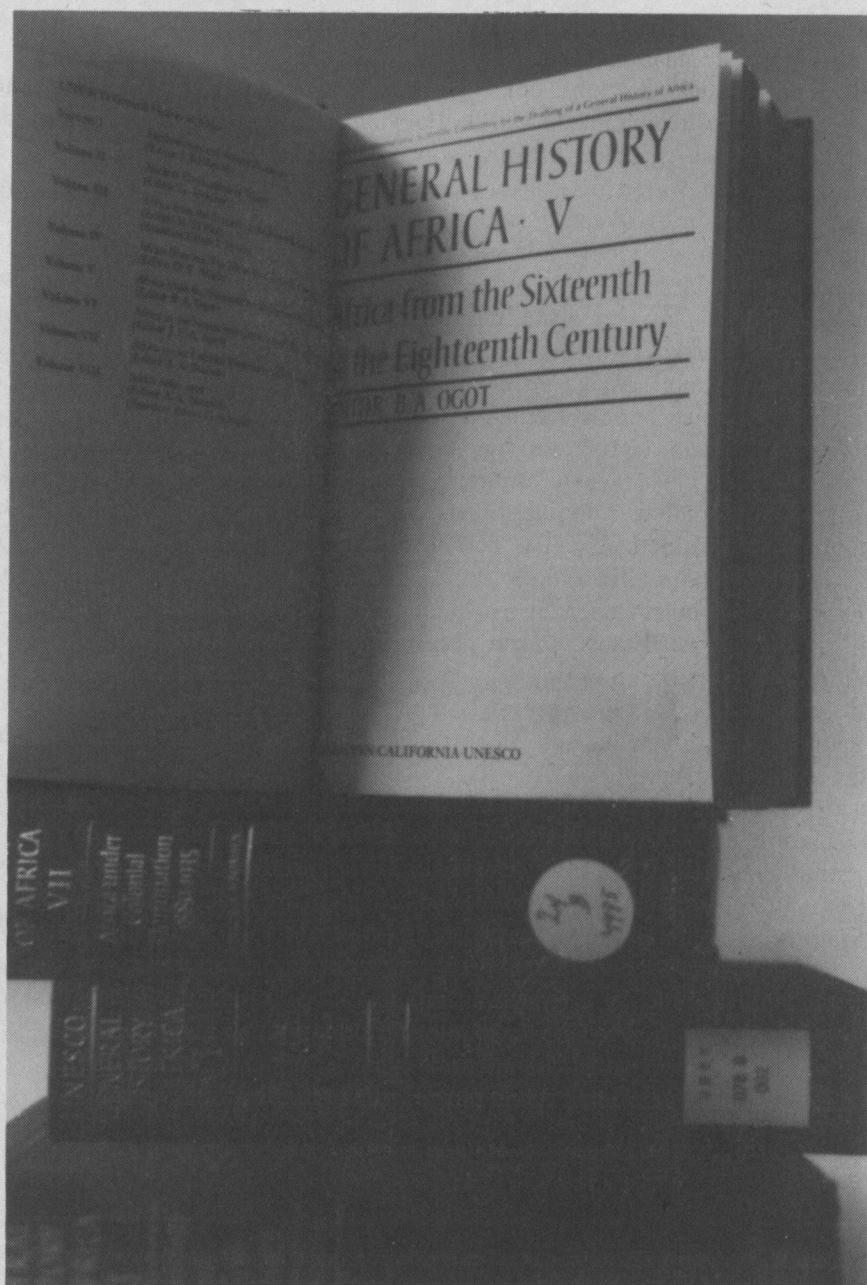
Consequently, African history was for the most part seen as the history of Europeans in Africa - a part of the historical progress and development of Western Europe and an appendix of the national history of the metropolis. It was argued at the time that Africa had no history because history begins with writing and thus with the arrival of the Europeans. Their presence in Africa was therefore justified, among other things, by their ability to place Africa in the 'path of history'. Colonialism was celebrated as a 'civilising mission' carried out by European traders, missionaries and administrators.¹

Thus African historiography was closely linked with the colonial period and its own official historiography, with prejudices acquired and disseminated as historical knowledge, and with eurocentric assumptions and arrogant certainty. Social Darwinism accorded Europeans an innate superiority over other peoples and justified Europe's plunder of the rest of the world.

But even during the dark days of colonialism there were other historians, for example the traditional historians, African historians educated in the West and Western colonial critics such as Basil Davidson, who were writing different African or colonial histories. These historians challenged the imperial historiographical hegemony, resulting by the 1950s into a *New African Historiography*. In a sense this New African Historiography was a development of, and a significant factor in, the intensification of national liberation movements. In other words, it was part of the decolonization process.

The first phase had essentially a 'demonstrative' character. It was necessary to demonstrate that African history could be written, that it was an academic discipline in its own merit. Local documentary and oral sources existed that could produce respectable history. A rediscovery of the pre-colonial history of

¹ See, for example, Prof. Roland Oliver's *Introduction to The Cambridge History of Africa*, Vol. VI: 1870-1905.



Enkele delen van UNESCO's *General History of Africa*.

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Africa was necessary in order to bring the old civilizations to light, to place new value on African culture and art. African ancient kingdoms were resurrected, cultural heroes were discovered and achievements in all walks of life were demonstrated. Cheikh Anta-Diop wrested Egyptian Civilization from the Egyptologists and restored it to the mainstream of African history.

Political independence created the necessary conditions for the flowering of the New African Historiography. History departments and research institutes established at the new African universities were handsomely endowed with research and publication funds. This is what crystallized into the *Nationalist history of the 1950s and 1960s*. The African historian celebrated the rise of the new states and praised the achievements of the African nationalists. Preference was given to the themes of African history considered useful to the development of new state structures. They gave the new states historical identity by writing national histories (such as *A History of Tanzania* or *A History of Zambia*) stretching into the remote colonial past. Thus the Africanist historiography provided the African nationalists and the new states with a legitimising ideology.

Born at the same time as the New African Historiography was a new sociology of development, which had even greater certainty. Economic well-being and the 'take-off' seemed to be promised and guaranteed to every African state, provided it followed the route indicated by the Western democracies and expounded in detail by the then economic chief priest of the West, W.W. Rostow, in a work that was considered as the 'bible of development', *The Stages of Economic Development* (1960). This 'modernization theory' had its counterpart in a liberal historiography which interpreted the whole of African history in a developmental perspective.

This liberal historiography and modernization theory were everywhere in the ascendant in the middle of the 1960s, favouring an ordered decolonialization, through agreement rather than armed struggle.

The decline of the liberal and nationalist version of African history in the late 1960s and 1970s

As we have already indicated, there is always a close link between theory and practice in historiography, between historical works and the changing political and socio-economic contours. By this time, neo-colonialism was becoming a reality in most African countries. The 'decade of development' had failed to produce any tangible results, because the development programmes were based on the presuppositions of neoliberal economics and on external models. Africa was troubled by continued crises of political instability and economic depressions which, in the main, were resolved by military coups and an increased tendency towards authoritarianism, bureaucratic centralism and a rigid re-enforcement of the executive and its capacity for repression. The economic and political models of the early 1960s had failed.

A deliberate parallel came to be drawn between the growing disaffection of the African no longer feeling represented by the 'elites' of the 1960s, and the birth of a radical historiography. African historiography, it was claimed, had taken up the cause of anti-colonialism and the legitimation of the newly independent states at the expense of a falsification of the past, replacing the 'savage' and 'primitive' Africa of colonial historiography with the no less simplified picture of an intrinsically egalitarian and socially compact 'traditional' society. As for the colonial period, it made nationalism so 'overdetermining' that the imperial framework in which the 'heroic' nationalist acted was lost, and consequently the limits of independence were not recognised. There was thus a growing irrelevance of its problematic and the need for new paradigms.

Two alternative approaches emerged to tackle the new challenges. One was the underdevelopment or dependence approach which was imported from Latin America and which was quickly accepted by many scholars as a persuasive reply to the question of development and tradition. Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* is a classical statement of this theory. The dependence theory also generated a protracted debate on the nature of the post-colonial state and its internal and external limits. But the historians soon discovered that the dependence theory lacked concepts with which to analyse African history before the emergence of the capitalist world system, or internal processes since then, without subordinating them to external determination.

The other approach that was adopted at this time to challenge the hegemony of nationalist historiography was marxism. Marxist influence rose with the triumph of radical national liberation movements in the early 1970s and the adoption of marxism as a political and ideological instrument by some political parties and states in Africa. Marxism also attracted a growing number of younger intellectuals who were dissatisfied with bourgeois and capitalist theories, processes and practices of development in Africa and around the world, and who wanted to articulate an alternative version and paradigm of development.

A heated debate on pre-capitalist modes of production was initiated by the French marxist anthropologists and economists. It was soon adopted by historians, and the debate brought notable contributions on both method and historical interpretation. In particular, it stimulated a critical re-reading of marxist analytical categories on a less ethnocentric basis so that European-derived 'laws of development' are no longer arbitrarily imposed on phenomena which require to be understood in their specificity. In short, marxism gradually came to be seen as a method rather than as providing an all-purpose explanatory scheme.

As far as African history is concerned, peoples and societies that were denied a history, in the hey-day of structural-functionalism (represented in Britain by the anthropology of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown) and which were subject of ethnographic and anthropological study alone - such as Evans-Pritchards' timeless Nuer - have had history given back to them by the marxist anthropologists and economist. Also the debates initiated by Marxist scholars have stimulated a critical revision of many themes previously covered in African

historiography. For instance, nationalist writings of the anti-colonial resistance have been enriched by analysis of the formation of class in resistance movements. Marxist analysis has also extended to enrich the theme of liberation struggle. The debate on the state and on the transition was rekindled by a consideration of the liberation struggle which form and objectives led to a wide discussion centered on the meaning and political weight of what was termed the 'second independence' of Africa.

By the beginning of the 1980s the study of African history had attained a high level of sophistication, as reflected in the growing complexity of epistemological and methodological debates and standards. Its highest point was the publication of the eight-volume UNESCO *General History of Africa*, described by a reviewer in the magazine *West Africa* as "one of the most ambitious academic projects to be undertaken in this century".

UNESCO General History of Africa

It was a big privilege for me to have been a member of the International Scientific Committee composed of thirty-nine members (two-thirds of whom were African and one-third non-African) that planned and supervised the writing and publication of the history: President of the Committee for about six years, contributor to several volumes, and editor of volume V which is discussed in detail below.

This ambitious project was launched in 1971 although preparatory work goes back to 1965. The first phase of the work lasted about four years and was devoted to field research, the collection of oral traditions and of unpublished manuscripts in Arabic and other African languages, and the compilation of archival inventories. The last activity resulted in the preparation of a *Guide to the sources of the History of Africa* in different foreign countries. So far, over ten volumes of these 'guides' have been published, and further works are in preparation.

The second phase lasted from 1969 to 1971, and was devoted to working out the approach to be adopted, the methodology to be used, and the machinery to be employed in the implementation of the project. The first two volumes were published in 1981.

The *General History* has several specific objectives. It aims "at the highest possible scientific level" and seeks to be "a work of synthesis avoiding dogmatism", although it does not intend to be exhaustive, but rather to demonstrate "the present state of knowledge, and the main trends in research", thus preparing the ground for future work. The volumes also seek to present "the true history of Africa", long obscured by Eurocentric preconceptions, methods and referents. It treats Africa as one historical unit, thus discarding spurious divisions based on geography, colour, race and religion. The aim here is "to show the historical relationships between the various parts of the continent" and "Africa's contribution to the history of mankind". In particular, *The General*

History of Africa is meant to be "a history of ideas and civilizations, societies and institutions" based on a wide variety of sources including archaeology, oral tradition and art forms. Finally, African history is viewed in this work from within, for it is meant to be "a faithful reflection of the way in which African authors view their own civilization".² Consequently, all the editors and the majority of the writers are African.

The *General History* has corrected two tendencies which were already widespread: the intellectual balkanization of Africa and the intellectual dependence in the production of social knowledge in Africa. By Africa, for instance, many of the scholars meant 'sub-Saharan' or 'Black' Africa, definitions which were intended for various ideological and political reasons to divorce North Africa from the rest of the continent. Since the 19th century many Western scholars had made strenuous efforts to deny the Africanness of North Africa and its peoples, especially the Africanness of the great civilization of ancient Egypt. Even the prefix 'black' as a badge of racial identity is, in effect, a concept of European racism, rooted in religious mythology and the European slave trade which, unfortunately, has been adopted by some African writers.

The *General History* provoked a furore among many Western Africanists because it threatened to overturn the international division of intellectual labour under which African historians narrowly concentrated on their ethnic groups and at most on their nations leaving foreign scholars to synthesize such micro-studies into continental histories. Research on regional and continental issues became a monopoly of foreign Africanists. This meant that the agenda and the terms of debate were effectively set by the latter. These two negative trends were effectively checked by the *General History*, which promoted a continental view of African history rooted in social knowledge produced mainly by indigenous scholars.

The general points and objectives I have enumerated can be discussed in detail in relation to volume V of the series which I edited. The volume, which is 1045 pages long, contains twenty nine substantial chapters and seventy plates and covers the period from 1500 to 1800. Broadly speaking, seven major themes are covered in the volume.

1. We notice that by the beginning of our period, most of Africa was already colonized. And most of what oral traditions refer to as migrations are, in fact, population expansions and drifts. The only exception is North East Africa covering modern Somalia, Southern Ethiopia, Southern Sudan, Northern Kenya and Northern Uganda - which experienced mass movements of population involving the Oromo, the Kalenjin, the Turkana, the Somali, the Luo, the Karamojong and the Maasai. These movements represent the colonization of marginal lands - all other wetter and fertile areas having been conquered and settled.

2 B.A. Ogot, 'Description of the Project', appearing in all the volumes.

2. The period is crucial for social formations on the continent. Most of the inhabitants of the different regions of Africa coalesced during these three centuries into bigger social, economic, religious, cultural and political aggregates that make up the African peoples today. In particular, the various ethnic and linguistic communities of present-day Africa are the products of this period.

3. As African societies evolved into distinct ethnic groups with their own linguistic and cultural characteristics, much of the continent was being transformed through the gradual integration of Africa into the world capitalist economy dominated by Europe. In 1500 most of African societies were relatively independent of the rest of the world. But by 1800 much of Africa had become integrated into circuits of the world market which securely linked it to Europe, America and Asia. The new relations were characterized by dominance and dependence both internally and in a new world order in which Europe dominated.

Three new economic structures developed within Africa: the caste system of production which developed in Western Sudan, the Niger-Chad region and the Sahara; the predatory economy which became widespread in the areas bordering the Mediterranean, the Nile and the Indian Ocean; and the entreport or trading-post economy which characterized the area bordering the Atlantic Ocean. In many societies, the indigenous ruling classes declined as a consequence of these socio-economic changes and were replaced by a wealthy African merchant class - the *Vashambadzi* of the Southern Zambezia and *Mestizos* or *Creoles* of West Africa. They acted as middlemen between the foreign traders and the African peasant producers whose economic situation deteriorated rapidly due to gross exploitation.

4. Politically, the period was characterized by two processes of state building and centralization of political authority. States which expanded and evolved centralized political systems during this period included Christian Ethiopia, Asante, Buganda, Madagascar, Rwanda and Maravi. A more common political phenomenon during the three centuries was for a declining or collapsed state to be succeeded by several localized states or by an economic system: for example, the Kongo, the Tio, Loango and Ndongo (future Angola) kingdoms declined from 1665 and were reorganized into large-scale economic systems. In the Upper Guinea Coast, Songhay Empire was succeeded by the Great Foul Empire and Mali was succeeded by Kaabu and Futa Jallon. The decline of the Great Zimbabwe gave rise to the Torwa state and later to the Mutapa Empire.

Novel ideas of the state and systems of government and administration developed in different regions of Africa, especially in the 17th and 18th centuries. These call for further research.

Also, there emerged in most of these states various social classes: aristocrats, military groups, commoners and slaves. Differences of speech, dress, household furniture, architecture and residence distinguished the classes and

their divisions. As the aristocrats and traders grew rich, the distinction shifted to an economic level.

The aristocracy - administrative and military - grew rich by various methods of exploitation. It soon developed an ideology of oppression. In Egypt, for example, the majority of the people were oppressed by a small elite made of the Mamluk beys leading to the rise of popular literature in Arabic, especially poetry and satire, dealing with the exploitation of the peasants. There were several peasant revolts against these oppressive regimes in West, North, East, Central and Southern Africa. There is an urgent need for a thorough study of these peasant uprisings in the 17th and 18th centuries.

5. This was the period of slave trade. It is evident that the process of dehumanizing the African intensified during this period, as a result of the increase in chattel slavery from 1619. Also, the intercontinental slave trade, more than anything else, established a world black presence. It led to a major African diaspora, especially in the Americas and the Caribbean.

6. The period of study also witnessed the introduction of new food crops from America such as maize, peanuts and manioc (cassava). These new crops diversified the agricultural economy of the continent as well as transforming the culinary traditions of most African societies.

7. The final major theme tackled in volume V is religion, especially Christianity and Islam. Starting with Christianity, the period witnessed its decline, especially in Ethiopia, on the East Coast and, to a lesser degree, in the Kongo. But Christianity, during this period, was on the whole syncretic. For example, in the Kongo, Christianity and African religion co-existed and had much influence on each other. Attempts to establish independent churches also date back to this period. It started in the Kongo in the 1630s and reached its peak in 1704 when Dona Beatrice Kimpa Vita founded Antonianism which rejected the missionaries and the whites.

Turning to Islam, it is evident that the expansion of the Islamic frontier in Africa constitutes one of the important themes of this period. Islam gained momentum in West Africa, Sudan, Ethiopia and on the East Coast. The spread of Islam was associated with political domination - in the Senegambia, the Sudan, the Bambara, Mossi, Kona and Gwirika kingdoms, in Hausaland and in Borno.

Apart from the simple geographical spread of Islam in Africa, at this time Muslim fundamentalism was already an important factor in many areas, especially in Mauritania and Hausaland. The Africans looked at Islam, as they viewed Christianity, syncretically. They accepted Islam while at the same time remaining faithful to their traditional religion.

As a result of the oppression of the African peasantry by the rural and urban elites, especially in Western Sudan, the Niger-Chad region, Egypt, the Sahara, the Maghrib, Ethiopia and Kongo, the Muslim leaders and the Christian

messianic movements found it easy to enlist the mass support of the peasantry. Men of religion promised equality and an end to injustice. They condemned the traditional aristocracies and the Europeans as the disruptive factors and cause of social injustice.

From this very brief summary of the major themes covered in volume V of the *General History of Africa*, it should be evident how the authors of the history attempted to fulfill the project objectives. We have demonstrated that it is possible to treat Africa as a historical unit, without injuring the integrity of the different cultures. It has also been shown that the rich varieties and diversities of African cultures can be reflected in a composite work of history covering the whole continent. Our hope in writing the history was to provide a kind of state-of-art account from which further elaborations, refinements and revisions can be made in the future.