



“The history of victims, conceptualized and produced by those who have never been victims, must be looked at with suspicion”, so declares Jacques Depelchin in stating the central idea that informs this collection of essays. The book starts off by asserting direct and strong connection between the themes and methods of professional historical writing on Africa and the cultural and political bias of the practitioners, particularly of Western scholars who have dominated the enterprise for slightly over half a century now. The author charges that Africanist history is tainted by cultural baggage carried over from historical learning in the West suffused with racist notions of Africa as well as by poorly disguised political endorsement of Capitalism. It is for this reason, he argues, that Africanist history not only failed to tap into indigenous conceptions and interpretations of the past but actually aided and abetted in their suppression and silencing. Worse still, according to Depelchin, the luminaries of Africanist history sought to steal the moral high ground from victims of such abominations as Slavery, Colonialism and Apartheid by claiming for themselves the mantle of “discovering” the oppressiveness of these arrangements and of championing the cause of “abolishing” them. These “syndromes of discovery and abolition” are the core ideas around which Depelchin attempts to weave the story of Africanist historiography. Depelchin does not have kinder words for legions of Western scholars who followed in the footsteps of the founding fathers, but reserves his harshest rebuke for their African disciples. In a paraphrase of Fanon’s admonition of native intellectuals back in the 1960s, he finds the latter as being “incapable of recognizing knowledge coming ... from their own backyard because they had been trained to despise it” (p. 12).

Following a description of the chief manifestations of the syndromes of abolition and discovery in the first chapter, the author devotes the following three chapters to descriptions of how the silencing of the inner story of Africa proceeded as the two syndromes played themselves out in the construction of conventional storylines about the end of the Slaver Trade and of Apartheid, about the Rwandan Genocide and the end of Colonial Rule. Chapters 5 and 6 examine the ways in which the silencing of African history got a helping hand from like-minded scholarship in social science disciplines like Anthropology and Development Economics. Chapter seven presents a contrastive study of fictional literature to show how some literary productions unwittingly advanced the process of silencing African voices while others strove to counter it. In chapter 8 the author shows the way towards breaking out of the silences by calling attention to highly participatory indigenous institutions and prac-

tices – like the Palaver- through which Africans constantly search and recast the past as part of their lived experiences. He draws insights from studies of Oral Literature to show how these institutions and practices provide venues for coming to terms with “inner voices” and “history in the making”.

Jack Depelchin demonstrates in this work tremendous breadth of knowledge and superb scholarship. He covers a lot of ground and wades through a wide variety of material both on the substance and the anthropology of historical, social-scientific and humanities scholarship on Africa. He also demonstrates great courage, the courage of saying things bluntly and forthrightly at a time when many progressive scholars of his generation have either retreated to the safety of the back stage or strive desperately for politically correct language with which to address power. Yet, it is precisely out of these strengths that, in my opinion, some of the flaws of his book emanate. The effort at being comprehensive has made the work somewhat rushed and anecdotal at times, and betrays the rather too wide a lens with which the author looked at issues and players in Africanist historiography. That nuance is sacrificed for a high-level of abstraction also explains, at least in part, the categorical and rather strident language that Depelchin employs throughout the book, courage notwithstanding.

It is not that Depelchin is really a lone warrior against Western constructions of Africa and the negative images with which it has come to be associated. Due, in no small part, to the works of scholars like Sheikh Anta Diop, V.Y Mudimbe, T. Zeleza, T. Bernal and many others, the inadequacies of Western categories, paradigms and epistemologies for proper understanding of African societies and histories have been given considerable exposure. Many a Western scholar has also been “reflexive” about this, notwithstanding Depelchin’s distaste for this term and the insincerity of the act that it is supposed to describe. Many students of African history in the West will, I am sure, agree with Depelchin that the first generation of Africanists failed to realize that their championing of African history

had a patronizing tone to it. Not many will dispute his point that some of these scholars did not demonstrate very high levels of empathy with Africans who had suffered the brunt of Slavery and Colonialism. He is also correct, and I think he will find many scholars in the West who will concur, that in the process a lot of distortion has taken place. Not many will deny that the professional tools of Africanists were crafted in the cultural milieu of the West and a lot of misunderstanding of Africa has come about as a result. Again, not many will deny that there was a tacit assumption on the part of Africanist historians that capitalism is bound to prevail in Africa, as elsewhere. But to say that Africanist historiography can be reduced to this list of errors, blind-spots and assumptions and that, on that account, histories of Africa coming out of the work of Western academics lose total credibility is, at the very least, totalizing and categorical. This reviewer believes that a great deal, in fact probably most, of Depelchin’s criticisms would have endured a much more nuanced and discriminating critique.

Working back from what Depelchin proposes as an antidote to the erstwhile silencing of African history, one gets the impression that the absence of a more discriminating approach to the existing scholarship in this work might have another, even more profound, reason behind it. The redemption of African history, the author appears to intimate, requires nothing less than radical departure from the basic canons of Western historical scholarship. What he proposes in the penultimate chapter of the book is that we pay greater attention to daily recall of the past by the African public, pay attention to history as public memory consistently re-invented, re-lived, performed and kept alive. As such, what he is proposing is nothing less than total divorce with history as a professional effort that seeks to recapture the past and tell as true and accurate stories of it as possible. Being a trained historian himself, it is understandable if Depelchin does not follow the logic of his own arguments and make this point explicitly and strongly. Yet, one wonders if the alternatives that he proposes really hold

a promise of “breaking out” of the silences that have inspired his critical study in the first place. What is the guarantee, we may ask, that these daily performances of culture and history will provide a road map to what has been kept out of the records? In what ways does tuning to the imaginations of Africans help us tell a genuine story of what happened since the days of the slave trade? If *Ojila* among the Idoma, or *Oriki* among the Yoruba are heavily existential and dynamic performances, what is the guarantee that they will help us go beyond the structured history to recapture the hidden past? While students of African history will, I think, unanimously agree with Depelchin that “any serious de-silencing of African history will have to reconnect organically with the oral matrix from which most of it originated” (p. 187), many would find this approach seriously deficient if it is envisioned as a goal in itself rather than as a strategy. Surely, what is meant by “breaking out of the silences” should be something larger and deeper than restoring to Africans the pleasure of continuously reinventing the past.

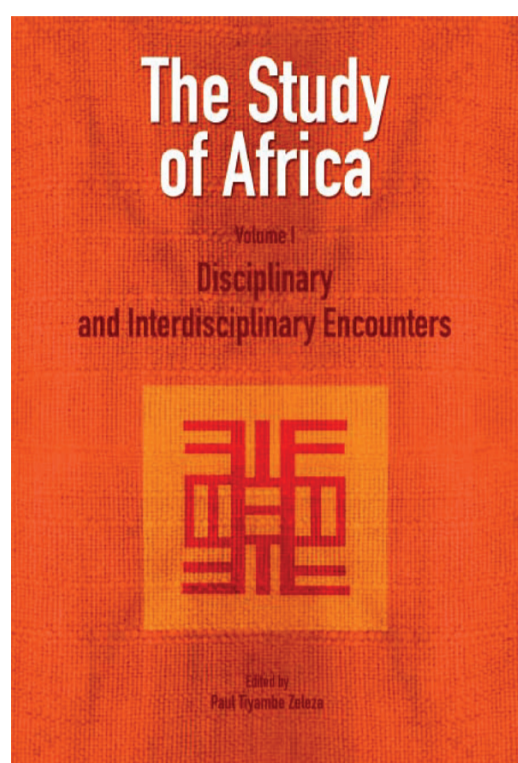
Depelchin’s book is a collection of essays, many of which were evidently written as far back as ten to twelve years ago. The author could have greatly improved the quality of his work by updating and editing these chapters in the interim. If he had done so, we would not have been reading such speculative prognostications like what might follow the South African elections of 1994 nearly a dozen years after that event. A little editorial attention would also have eliminated the repetitions and redundancies in the book, notably the repeated explanations of what the author meant by the syndromes of abolition and discovery and the political and historical setting in which the academic study of African history began. These are written in each chapter as though they are being introduced for the first time.

However, none of these criticisms should diminish the value of a work which tells a basic truth about the circumstances under which Africanist history was born and nurtured, and about the manhandling of Africa and its past in the interest of the capitalist juggernaut. Depelchin’s work will be of considerable interest to specialists and non-specialists alike. For African students and researchers in particular, it is a necessary reading.



The Study of Africa

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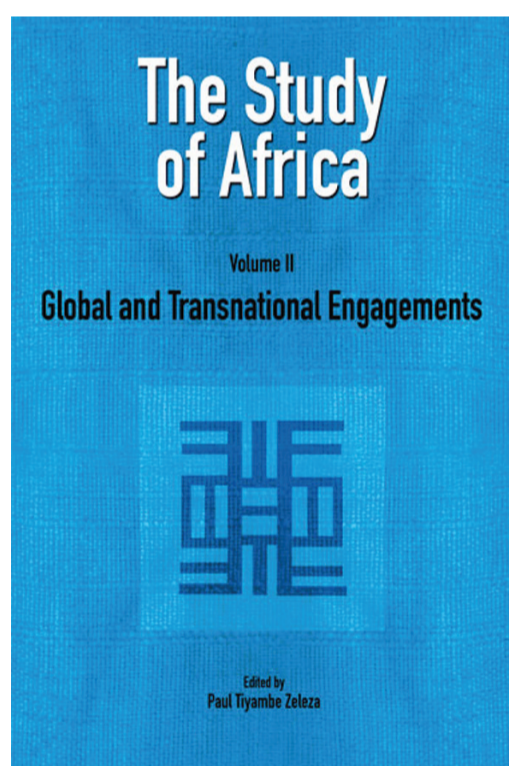
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