

Historical Research with Historical Depth: Africa, Human Rights and Citizenship

The social sciences and the humanities in the contemporary African university are marked by a sharp dichotomy between research and writing. Very little writing is research based. The norm for university-based scholars is to recycle old research in response to new consultancy demands. Our first need is therefore to promote fresh research in response to intractable problems.

Secondly, history departments in African universities are in a deepening crisis. As a rule, consultancy writing is strongly driven by immediate problems and has little time or inclination for historically informed research. Because history has been cut off from contemporary

research, history departments now tend to focus more and more on teaching, and less and less on research. At the same time, social sciences tend to look at social problems outside of their historical context, instead of looking for turn-key solutions.

Most research on African history is located in universities outside Africa, mainly in the West. Its focus is increasingly either Diasporic (therefore outside Africa) or trans-regional, where Africa tends to function as an adjunct to Europe. To the extent there is Africa-focused research, its focus is mainly contemporary, that is, on the colonial and the post-colonial.

The irony is that historical research on Africa tends to lack historical depth. Historians tend to work mainly on the margins of the European archive. They carry on with the assumption that African history cannot have a written archive of its own because it is more or less oral. This prejudice is so widespread that even progressive writings on Africa begin with

Mahmood Mamdani
Makerere University
Uganda

a short comment on the pre-colonial, and then go on to focus on the colonial and the post-colonial. We can thus say that an entire range of scholarship on Africa, from the right to the left, has embraced the notorious thesis advanced by Professor Trevor-Roper, the Reagus Professor of History at Oxford in the post-World War II period, that 'African history really began when the white man first set foot on the continent'.

There are important exceptions to this observation, which is why there is hope. One such exception is Ousmane Kane's CODESRIA Green Book on 'Non-Europhone Intellectuals'. But, given the overall context whereby most research is so present-oriented that it tends to function as a kind of hand-maiden to a fire brigade approach, I suggest that our second need is to find a way out of our contemporary historical amnesia through a more historically informed endeavour.

Thirdly, I want to illustrate the importance of this shift by one example, that in the domain of politics and law, with specific reference to the associated questions of 'human rights' and 'citizenship'. The research agenda on human rights is mainly driven by international research NGOs like Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group. They share a common methodology and a common understanding of how to move forward. The methodological focus is to document atrocities, and to name and shame perpetrators. Their political demand is for a ju-

dicial process that will deliver punishment on behalf of victims.

The 'naming and shaming' model of criminal justice is based on the experience at Nuremburg, which has been turned into a paradigm, a model for criminal justice. It has been the dominant model driving human rights practice in most ongoing African political conflicts. The Nuremburg paradigm is based on two assumptions: first, that victory will create the necessary political basis for criminal trials; and second, that there will be negligible political costs, given the assumption that that yesterday's victims and victors will not have to live together; there will be an 'Israel' for victims.

Neither assumption obtains in contemporary Africa. Indeed, the African experience with conflict resolution points to another model with a different set of assumptions: that the opponent should not be criminalized but be treated as a political adversary. This may be said to be one of the key lessons of the transition from apartheid in South Africa (Kempton Park), Mozambique, and South Sudan. Our third need is to theorize the African experience, especially where it seems to contradict conventional wisdom.

Given this theoretical and historical context, key issues for research should include human rights and citizenship. The thrust of the research should be less on documenting atrocities, and more on a historical understanding of key issues driving the cycle of violence in these conflicts. The overarching ambition should be to develop a theoretical critique and a political alternative to the 'naming and shaming' technology of human rights groups, because it ignores both context and issues.