African History / History in Africa: Academic, Vernacular Histories and Area Studies

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The past of Africa has always haunted the future of the continent. Nowhere else has the past(s) of the future(s) so dramatically debated for many reasons. Africa is situated by particular traditions and histories in the understanding of history as a discipline and as a linear narrative of progress, development and modernization. Considered as a site within Enlightenment thought, Africa was excluded from, deformed or constantly invented in the records on which historical evidence is constructed and argued for.[1]

The end of history proposes a unique possible future of rationality and productivity with the triumph of the free market economy, in the era of globalization. In Africa, the landscapes of disease, poverty, violence and unfulfilled desire of consumption are blended with an unprecedented cultural and aesthetic creativity (music, fashion and painting), religious revivals and entrepreneurial experimentations imprinting African heritages and alternatives modernities on the world stage. They have been reconfiguring the imagining of the past and of the future, affecting both the traditions of sociabilities and the politics of memory, belongings, inheritance and generations.

The pre-colonial, colonial and nationalist-postcolonial moments are important inflexion points. They are used to rearticulate the meaning of past verities and recycle the resources of the past to reference the present and envision the future. From Conrad's Africa, history-less and devoid of a future, to the recognition of an African history before the Europeans and the agency of Africans in making their histories, narrating and reorienting them for specific purposes, the African 'historical inventory' has gone through many phases. The challenges, possibilities and limitations of colonial postcolonial situations were contested and negotiated. In the 1950s, Nkrumah announced the advent of a new era of "Black Power" and the inventions of new histories. A decade later, Ayikwei Armah announces the closure of the nationalist future in his novel *The Beautyful Ones are Not Yet Born.*[2]

In the global new world order, the meaning of history – the past, present and future – as well as notions of bounded spaces of identifications and interventions are under scrutiny. The conditions of production of history and of the past in academic and public spaces have undergone various transformations. The extent to which the pre-colonial and the colonial have largely shaped (or not) the present and the future of Africa is still debated, as well as the impact of the present and the imagining of the future on the reconstructions of the past. Among the issues, the nature of the various discursive economies of selecting and configuring the past(s) of the future(s) are prominent:

- Who is responsible for leading the project and for whom?
- Who is active for its production and dissemination?
- On which space will it be projected?
- What are the idioms of expression and representations?
- What sort of model(s) of the past are available?
- Which identities are formed in this process?
- Who must ask such questions, to whom must they be addressed and who must respond?
- How is the situation affecting the way intellectuals, scholars, artists, activists, politicians, religious leaders, donors… are reframing their intellectual and political projects?

Finally the investigation demands that we ask how the 'modern' (for a better word) and/or the contemporary is being (re)articulated in a time of African Renaissance (what period?), a time of crisis, expectations and hopes flourishing in pluralistic identities and manifestations.

I would like to begin this contribution with a detour, exploring the 'situatedness' of the knowledge we produce (through research) and disseminate (through teaching and publications), and the challenges we face precisely because of our location – outside the West. I focus on the production of history and the economies of knowledge, seduction and moral, social and cultural prescriptions (the traditions) associated with it in Africa. We must ask how locations and circumstances shape the ways in which narratives are constructed, discursive strategies are devised and languages are (re)fashioned to seduce a group or a community and produce a vernacular history. Vernacular history has been infiltrating African literature, musical and theatrical performances**.** It is unstable, open to negotiation and revision and, at the same time, it engages daily in reframing 'the literary imagination'[3] and identification emblems of a community. How do we write African history, outside or in dialogue (while preserving its autonomy) with 'World-History' or at the 'limit of World-History'[4] has been a critical aspect of historical inquiry outside the West. In the early nationalist phase, African history's main concern was to 'decolonize African history'. The focus was largely on oral traditions, and the knowledge economies of oral cultures conceived as alternative or complementary sources and resources for history writing.[5] How are the oral tradition approaches that were preoccupied by gathering and narrating a history relevant to nation or African unity building in the 1960s and 70s, engaging with the larger debates about oral history?[6] In addition, the new context (from the end of the 1990s onwards) is characterized by the discovery of written representation of histories and identities

by African actors (from the early phase of Islamization well into the colonial period) as well as the exploration of local histories (crafted along Islamic and Christian narrative formats) which have indeed open new territories for African historiographies, literature and cultural studies.[7] African literature, like history, has been continually preoccupied with exploring modes of representing history and trauma, in particular under colonial rule.[8]

How are African historians locating themselves in a discussion that considers historiography as an act of expropriation[9] by conquest and colonization? How do we 'recover their past' we were expropriated though historiographical operations that the terms of history and the mode of composition, recording and politics of history writing,[10] under the rubric of Reason[11] or in reference and accordance to the 'colonial library'[12] or the 'Racial contract'[13] and their modes of 'colonialist knowledge which ties historical narratives strictly to the state'.[14] Guha (2002) establishes a clear distinction between two paradigms: the West narratives which are issued from the narrator's initiative and those of the South which are from the listener's perspective, to define historicality considered as a narrative territory which, located outside the bounds of historiography, geography and authority of World-History, and which favors the proliferation of multiple narratives, in particular those outside the public affairs domain.

Issues

The first question I would like to raise is the intellectual, scientific, institutional and ideological consequences of the institutional framework and conditions under which we generate knowledge defined primarily as geographically situated (areas and cultures). It is not mainstream knowledge. It requires validation/recognition (intellectual and institutional), outside its territory and specific objects, languages, methods, etc., by disciplines that are today searching for quantifiable, measurable and generalizable evidence.

The second question that I will engage concerns the idea that 'history makes geography and not the other way around'. Such a statement needs to be complicated by addressing the following issues: (a) Histories and geographies are plural. Geographies are 'invented' and constantly revised by intellectual, political and religious social practices and imaginations.[15] Which geographies inform (should inform) our scholarship? Histories are also constrained and reconfigured by actual/physical or invented geographies. Geography (and geographers) provided the model (along with and in concert with sociology) for the more important historiographical revolution, the Ecole des Annales (*Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*) and its Histoire totale agenda based on an 'appetite for interpretation, initiatives, experiences and confrontations'[16] and the exploration of almost tangible realities: a region, 'human groups', a landscape.

Two questions should be addressed in this context: Is it possible (productive) to explore the local within a discipline or is breaking away from the colonial library (Western universalism), the necessary condition for producing locally informed social sciences (humanities) studying particular places? Is geography central to our professional identity and how is such a concern reflected in CODESRIA? Is it possible to re-formulate the contours and theoretical concerns of the Council outside the geographical configuration which has defined it? How do we re-invent geographies outside the Cold War political economy of area studies? Is it possible to create a meaningful and productive intellectual dialogue between Africa, Asia and the Middle East in the humanities and social sciences?

Let us consider 'history-writing'. African history has always been the territory of confrontation between two conceptions of history writing: the 'academic' and the 'vernacular' history-writing.

Academic History

African academic history has always been characterized by the search for an archive of its own. In 1953, Roland Oliver, one of the British founding fathers of African history, at the inaugural conference of lecturers in African history, insisted on 'whatever one was dealing with – evidence from archeology or oral tradition or written documents – African history must from now on be Africa-centred…. Evidence drawn from metro-politan archives must be supplemented by that from local archives…. Most new research must be undertaken in Africa'.[17] In 1960, P. Curtin reissued Roland Oliver's directive. He invited Africanist historians to work outside the comfort of metropolitan archives in Paris and London since 'they contained the history of European interests in Africa, rather than the history of Africa itself…. African History written from entirely metropolitan archives can no longer be considered valid'.[18] In 2005, the coordinators of the Aluka Project, aimed at digitizing the records of Southern African Liberation Movements, noted: "the task of digitizing should be viewed as an opportunity to reformulate the contours of the history of the liberation struggles".[19]

Vernacular History

Vernacular History-writing as a comparative and competitive tradition of history-writing could be compared to Tim Mitchell's 'research in the wild', and Partha Chatterjee's 'counter disciplinary move'[20] or Karin Barber 'tin trunk literacy'.[21] It could also include in its territory, Afrocentrism and 'romantic Egyptocentrism'.[22] The production of the 'vernacular history library' benefitted immensely from Muslim and Christian textual resources. Muslim and Christian texts have long provided the templates by which Africans (among other communities) came to see themselves as people. Adrian Hastings captures nicely this process (for Christianity), using the concept of 'literary imagination'.[23] meaning the consolidated African conceptions of divinity and giving, through the translation of the Bible, an identifiable shape to traditional religion. By analyzing the 'local' histories according to their place of origin, production and debate, it is possible to map new geographies and identify the influences that guided the construction of the specific historical narrative.[24]

In addition to the search for an archive, African history has been busy responding to the 'continuing "conceptual Eurocentrism" in the study of African history: the reliance on analytical tools derived from reflections on European or, by extension, "Western" experience'.[25] 'Third World' theoretical and ideological contributions have been enriching for African Studies. The main requirement for overcoming conceptual Eurocentrism in African history, in the interest of a more genuinely 'general' social science and 'global' history, is reciprocal comparison of Africa and other regions, or more

precisely, specific areas within Africa with counterparts elsewhere. Instead of rejecting the project of generalization (general models from European experiences), we probably need to work towards more genuine generalizations through properly comparative historical research.

How does CODESRIA situate itself within this collaborative framework? Under which conditions could it contribute to this conversation? What are the conditions under which it is possible to 'provincialize Europe'[26] or 'put Europe in the African Mirror'?[27] Under which conditions could we implement it, not only in history but also in political science, anthropology, comparative literature, etc.?

Another Genealogy of African Studies

Early Black historians made Africa a key focus of their studies. Africa became critical in the late 19th/early 20th century to represent African American, both individually and collectively. Study of Africa developed as one of the central tenets of black public life. African American scholars and activists reacted against the colonial library through (re)appropriating and subverting the 'colonialist/imperial' approach to history, geography and politics. They launched the struggle over the meaning of the past and of Africa, re-defining radically inter-war Black politics and public culture to: (a) produce counter narratives and document Black contribution to world history by linking the achievement of Ancient Africa (Egypt) to the contributions of Black slaves in the building of the US; (b) re-introduce Africa and Africans in World History; (c) build an intellectual field of African studies; (c) challenge Western conceptions of History, the discipline of history and historical practices by re-locating the origin of civilization; and (d) de-centering Western historiography and historical narratives. The new sciences of the late 19th and early 20th century – ethnology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics and cultural morphology – explained African cultures and argued that Africans were civilized. Another site of knowledge production – African American scholars and activists – turned Africa into a central issue in this quest. This was particularly true of DuBois, not only in *The Crisis* magazine, but also in his historical writing, including *The Negro* (1915), *Black Folk, Then and Now; An Essay in the History and Sociology of the Negro Race* (1939),[28] and *The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part which Africa has Played in World History (*1946).[29]

New Intellectual Agenda[30]

I would like to conclude with a few remarks on area studies as both academic and policy territory configured by the particular histories of regions outside the West, formally colonized and under-developed or developing. The function of the new territories was to produce locally informed knowledge by devising instruments, methods and theories to account for their specific trajectories, their reactions to the encounter with Europe and modernity. The reaction to the exposure to 'area studies' in many non-Western societies has been the search of a *point fixe* outside Europe and the carving of an autonomous space of deployment by a daily engage-ment with European modernity and the Enlightenment library, the economies of knowledge that supported the invention of Africa as well as the singular histories of Africa (oral histories, histories of domination, transactions and connections).

African scholars worked hard to subvert area studies and de-link it from the Cold War agenda by: (1) raising the conditions under which meaningful (usable and productive knowledge could be produced and (2) addressing the consequences of their production on the disciplines and asking the following critical questions: (a) Is Africa worth a disciplinary treatment? (b) Are the disciplines (except, of course, anthropology) equipped to deal with African situations (the idea that Africa is outside of history and of the disciplines)? (c) What are the conditions (possibilities) of inserting Africa (or for that matter the Middle East and Asia) in the scientific discourse? (d) What are the limitations and flexibility of disciplines in accounting for areas outside the West? (e) Is it necessary to ask the disciplines to adjust or to interrogate their assumptions from local conditions? (f) Is area studies' knowledge contributing to disciplinary knowledge?

In order to better understand Africa's present-day location in the world, we have to re-open the debate regarding the genealogy of African studies, African's connections to other regions of the world (Saharan world; Indian Ocean corridors and the Atlantic), to restructure the way we study Africa (continental Africa; sub-Saharan Africa, Black Africa [Hegel's Africa proper]; Pan-African intellectual geographies of Africa…). Taking a continental and global approach to African studies, I believe, is the most progressive move that we can make today as educators and scholars. The teaching and scholarly pursuit of Africa (primarily sub-Saharan Africa) as a discrete entity, as favoured within an area studies model, has served to re-create the marginalization of Africa, from the rest of the world, that was at the heart of the imperial project (and one of the lasting legacies of European imperialism), to section Africa off from the world, to see it as a continent absent of history, and as critically outside of human or world history (the history of humanity, human progress). One of the primary objectives of African studies should be to work towards the overturning of the idea of African studies as limited to sub-Saharan Africa, to re-incorporate North Africa into our understanding of African studies, and to insist on Africa's location in the world.

As we attempt to revisit our understanding of Africa and its location in the world within the academic terrain, we are also changing the way that Africa is located beyond the academy. Can we imagine an African studies research and teaching agenda that takes, at its core, the following principles: that (a) culture and politics are inseparable; they must be re-situated and studied within new frameworks of analysis that privilege interconnectivity and the formation of new academic geographies; (b) disconnecting Africa from the rest of the world re-creates the imperial vision of Africa; (c) privileging African-authored texts – popular and literary texts, scholarly articles (from all time periods), art and film – is imperative, and (d) understanding African history as connected to the African diaspora, that encourages the study of pan-Africanism, is indispensable.

Notes

1. James Wilkinson, "A Choice of Fictions: Historians, Memory and Evidence", *PMLA* 111, 1996 (80-92).
2. London, Heinemann, 1968.
3. Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood. Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

4. Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* [Italian Academy Lectures]. New York. Columbia University Press, 2002.

5. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*. London, James Currey, 1985 et *Living with Africa*. Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1994.

6. Marcel Detienne, *L'invention de la mythologie*. Paris, Gallimard, (1980); Philippe Joutard, *Ces voix qui viennent du passé*. Paris, Hachette, 1983 et Eric Havelock, *Introduction to Plato*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1963.

7. Axel Harniet-Sievers (ed.), *A Place in the World: New local Historiographies from Africa and South Asia*. Leiden, Brill, 2002 et Karin Barber, (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and the Making of Self*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006.

8. C. H. Kane (*L'Aventure ambigue*. Paris, Plon, 1963) captures the colonial situation as an "ambiguous" adventure for the colonized subject and Titsti Dangarembga, (*Nervous Condition*. London, the Women Press, 1988) as a "nervous condition" following F. Fanon and).

9. R.Guha op. cit. p. 2.

10. Idem. pp. 1 and 2 and Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation: Getting the History Crooked*. Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

11. R. Guha, op. cit. p. 2.

12. V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*. Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1988.

13. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*. thaca, Cornell Univeersity Press, 1998.

14. R. Guha, op. cit. p. 5.

15. (V. Y. Mudimbe, op. cit et François Hartog, *Le Miroir d'Hérodote. Essai sur la représentation de l'autre*. Paris, Gallimard, 1980.

16. Jacques Revel, "introduction", J. Revel & L. Hunt (eds.), *Histories. French constructions of the Past. Postwar French Thought*. Vol. I. New York, the New Press, 1995, p. 12.

17. R. Oliver, "African History: SOAS and Beyond", A. Kirk-Greene (ed.), *The Emergence of African History in British Universities*. Oxford, Worldview Press Publications, 1995, pp.22-23.

18 "The Archives of Tropical Africa: a Reconnaissance", *Journal of African History*, 1, 1, 1960, (129-147).

19. Allen Isaacman, P. Lalu and T. Nygren, "Digitization, History, and the Making of a Postcolonial Archive of South African Liberation Struggles: the Aluka Project", *Africa Today*, 52,. 2, 2005.

20. Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed. Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York, Columbia University press, 2004.

21. K. Barber, "Introduction", op. cit.

22. See for example W. J. Moses discussion of the "limitless range of opinion […] attached to the term Afrocentrism by authors across the political spectrum, most of whom are less interested in scholarly investigation of African American cultures and historical traditions than in forwardly myriad of political agendas" (*Afrotopia. Thr Roots of African American Popular History*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 9) and of his belief that sentimental Afrocentrism and romantic Egyptocentrism are usually harmless and inoffensive, if sometimes extravagant, folk traditions. They are whimsical, entertaining, and often charmin fantiasies developed by nineteenth-century journalists, preachers, novelists and vernacular storytellers", idem, p. 17.

23. Adrian Hastings, op. cit.

24. Axel Harniet-Sievers. "Introduction", op. cit. p.

25. Gareth Austin, "Reciprocal Comparison and African History: Tackling conceptual Eurocentrism in the Study of Africa's Economic Past", p. 1.

26. D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

27. Stefano Fenoaltea, "Europe in the African Mirror: The Slave Trade and the Rise of Feudalism", *Rivista di Storia Economica*, 15, 2, 1999 (123-165).

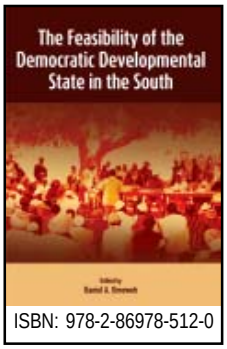
28. Edited by H. Aptheker, 1924

29. W.E.B. DuBois, *The World and Africa*: *An Inquiry into the Part which Africa Has Played in World History*. New York: International Publishers Company, 1965.

30. This section is largely influenced by the ongoing discussion on the future of African studies at Columbia University conducted within MEALAC and the Institute of African Studies with the contribution of Africanist and non-Africanist colleagues. I would like to mention in particular my colleagues, Jinny Prais, G. Mann, H. Mokoena, S. B. Diagne and Mahmood Mamdani.

The Feasibility of the Democratic Developmental State in the South

Daniel A. Omoweh



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The book examines the prospects of a democratic developmental state in Latin American, African and Asian countries, collectively referred to in this work as the global South. Practically, the state refers to the political leadership. Within this context, it interrogates the politics of the state and the unresolved critical issues it has engendered in the state-development discourse such as the need to re-conceptualize the developmental state, democratization, elections, inclusion, indigenous entrepreneurial and business class, political parties and cooperation among the countries of the South. It looks into the need to re-centre the sought state in the development process of the Southern countries after over two and a half decades of embracing neo-liberal policies and economic reforms that, rather than transform, sank the adjusted economies into deeper political, social and economic crises. It contends that the capacity of the state to overcome the market and democratic deficits resides with its democratic credentials. Finally, it suggests strategies that could lead to the rise of a democratic developmental state in the South.