

The Challenges of Colonial Historiography to the Study of African and Indian History up to the Second Half of the 20th Century

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Abstract: Colonial historiography has been an ineffective tool in the study colonialism both in African and Indian history. It is a major flaw in the thinking of the Eurocentric writers about the development process of the history of the societies of Africa and India. This development has formed the subject-matter and focus of the paper. The paper's findings show that contrary to the western basis of history which denigrated the African and Indian past, the development and expression of African and Indian historiography as an ideological wing of nationalist struggle laid a crucial foundation for the reconstruction of their past. The most significant change in the historiography during the second half of the 20th century is the use of discourse and locally grounded narratives to question older paradigms of historical understanding of African and Indian historiography. The paper has advanced the argument that historical consciousness was a factor in Indian and African societies in the pre-colonial period and the tools for its expression grew and expanded only with the different epochs of European activities on the continent, as well as the events of the post-colonial period. This paper used the historical research method, the multidisciplinary approach, intellectual perspectives of history, and secondary sources to achieve the objectives of its focal point. It concludes that African historians must continue to be rigorous in establishing independent views in their writing of the African past.

Key Words: Colonial Historiography, Historical Consciousness, African History, Development Process, Nationalist Struggle

Introduction

Colonial historiography was the child of the early and later accounts and records of the European contact and activities both in Africa and in India. These activities in the early period were wholly devoted to economic activities especially trade, and had its roots in the period even before the 19th century. The later accounts which colonial historiography borrowed and consulted came from European explorers and missionaries in, as well as the records kept by the European colonial officials about their day to day administration of their acquired territories in the colonies of Africa and India.³

These writings as presented by colonial historiography failed to portray Africa and India in true and objective light and their challenges to the study of history far outweigh their importance, usefulness and credibility. To this end, during the period of nationalist struggle and attainment of independence both in Africa and in India, nationalist historians developed a counter-historiographical identity to correct the misinterpretations of history evident in colonial historiography under the conception of nationalist historiography.

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³ Ayandele E.A., (1980), "External Relations with Europeans: Explorers, Missionaries and Traders," in, O. Ikime, ed., *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, pp. 367-370.

Against the aforementioned, this paper makes attempt at examining the similarities in the challenges of colonial historiography to the study of African and Indian history up to the second half of the 20th century. It is divided into three parts, namely, the Foundations of Colonial Historiography, The Assumptions of Colonial Historiography, and Historical Evidence and the Challenges of Colonial Historiography. A conclusion shows the efforts by Indian and African historians to re-assert the historical consciousness of the continent.

The Foundations of Colonial Historiography

The word "colonial historiography" has two meanings. One is about the history of colonial countries, while the other is about art that was impacted by colonial dominance ideology.⁴ The majority of historians currently write on colonial historiography in the second meaning. In truth, colonial authorities' practice of writing about colonial countries was motivated by a desire for dominance and justification of colonial control. As a result, most of these historical texts included criticism of Indian and African communities and cultures. Simultaneously, there was admiration for western culture and morals, as well as veneration of the empire's founders. This pattern may be seen in the history of India written by James Mill, Mountstuart Elphinstone, Vincent Smith, and others. They founded the colonial school of history, which was critical of the subject people. Colonial historiography was founded on shaky ground. It utilized the early European accounts that were written before the 19th century which goes back to the 14th and 15th centuries. This early contact by the Europeans was wholly devoted to economic and commercial interests and the information kept by the traders related especially to trade with Africans in gold, ivory, textiles, spices and slaves, and the traders sometimes used the availability of these commodities to identify the continent, such as the Gold Coast, Ivory Coast, and so on. Most of the writings of the traders were not explicit and were almost wholly concerned with economic activities and covered only the coastal areas of Africa and any information about the interior of the continent was second handed.

The later European accounts which colonial historiography adopted were kept in the 18th century by explorers, expeditionists and missionaries, as well as the records of officials of colonial administrations across Africa with the direct colonization of the continent by the beginning of the 20th century. But these accounts, records and diaries kept by the Europeans were highly subjective as they were products of the European world view and saw Africa and India in the light of European values. According to Ayandele, the information that was collected was weak as it was not only second handed, but came from cooks, stewards, and other associates, who were mostly ignorant of what they were reporting. He further assert that in their writings, much attention was paid to African and Indian "exotic" practices, as they saw it, without attempting to know the essence of such practices.⁵

⁴ Kapil Kumar, "Challenging Colonial Historiography : The Indian Scenario", Maulana Azad Memorial Lecture 11th November, 2017

⁵ Ayandele, "External Relations with Europeans... pp. 368-369. See also A.E. Afigbo, "A Re-assessment of the Historiography of the Period," in, J.F. Ade Ajayi and I. Espie., eds., *A Thousand Years of West African History*, Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press, 1965, pp. 419-430.

The Assumptions of Colonial Historiography

The main assumption of colonial historiography was the ideological weapon adopted to justify European conquest of Africa. There is a common trend among colonial historiographer's to consider pre-colonial Africa and India as one who had no history prior to the coming of colonialism. Indeed, Colonial historiography equated history with only written records and rejected the Indian and African societies' rich historical heritage of oral traditions and literature, and also ignored the earlier written materials and sources of history of Africa such as Ajami, Arabic, Ge'ez, hieroglyphics, and of Indian works in Sanskrit literature, Purana, Pali chronicles and commentaries, and the Jain works, Kalhan's work, amongst others.. Under these writings, Indians and Africans were degraded and presented as only forms of higher beastly animals. Some European authors have criticized and even questioned Africa's historical legacy, with one even saying, "Africa had no history prior to European exploration and colonization, that there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness", her past "the unedifying gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe".⁶ Even Hegel, in an apparent attempt to besmirch Africa, once asserted that "Africa is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit".⁷ C. G. Seligman wrote openly in *Races of Africa*, denying the link of a whole continent with any type of civilisation. "civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites, its history is the record of these peoples and of their interaction with the two other African stocks, the Negro and Bushmen".⁸ He was implying that without the Hamitic influence, the other two "races" would be unable to achieve anything. His belief in the myth of light-skinned superiority was part of the widespread European prejudice of the late 19th and early 20th century. All of these judgments about Africa's history developed as a result of humanity's proclivity to degrade and denigrate one another. The lack of written documents in much of Africa created a significant barrier to historical reconstruction, which prompted African scholars to adapt and insist on using oral history to recreate her past, despite the limitations in this medium. The lack of written materials in Africa, particularly south of the Sahara, posed a difficulty to historiography. The absence of written records was interpreted by detractors of Africa's history, such as Hegel and Trevor-Roper, to suggest that Africa had no historical heritage.

Moreover, many historians believed that India, like Africa, lacked a past. Hegel is one of these scholars; he was unmistakably unambiguous, with no ambiguity: He said that India has no history and that what it does have is fore-history. Hegel makes it clear that he is referring to ancient India in another passage: "[T]he real objective history of a nation cannot be said to have begun until it possess a written historical record. A culture which does not yet have a history has made no real cultural progress [and this applied to the pretended history] of India over three and a half thousand years". Furthermore, J. W. McCrindle (a popular authority on Ancient India by the classical writers) holds that "The Indians themselves did not write history. They produced no doubt, a literature both voluminous and varied... but within its vast range history is conspicuous by its absence. Their learned men were Brahmanas whose modes and habits of thought almost necessarily incapacitated them for the task of historical composition...they allowed events, even those of the greatest public moments, to pass unrecorded, and so to perish from memory and

⁶ Trevor-Roper, Hugh, "The Rise of Christian Europe", *The Listener*, 28 November 1963, 871.

⁷ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Philosophy of History*. trans. by J. Jibree. New York: Dover, 1956.

⁸ Cited in, "Edith R. Sanders The Hamitic Hypothesis; Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective", *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 10,4, (1969): 521-532.

Sanskrit literature if deficient in history and chronology”.⁹ But his views cannot be accepted as they run contrary to the truth. R.G.Bhandarkar’s¹⁰ observation, that “India has no real history....the historical curiosity of the peoples was satisfied by legends what we find of a historical nature in the literature of the country before the arrival of the Mahommedans, can also be disposed of. He like many other scholars considers only Kalhana’s Rajatarangini a historical work.

James Mill believed that ancient and medieval India was a very uncivilized and stagnant world, and that improvement would be difficult without liberal thinking. He believed that British rule had to play a significant role in this regard, as well as providing a purpose and justification for British rule. Many post-colonial British progressive intellectuals of the 19th century agree with James Mill's viewpoint, and the British government, too, took certain socially beneficial actions as a result of James Mill's beliefs. His historical book was used to instruct British officers as if it were a textbook.¹¹ Colonial history grew up with some changes to its fundamental ideas and thoughts as per historical situations and necessities.

An orientalist depiction of Africa and India was common, promoting the idea of modern western civilization's superiority; this is the term recently popularized by Edward Said and others; however, a new generation of nationalist scholars had identified and criticized this trend in British writings, beginning with James Mill. Consequently, historians such as David Hume and Hugh Trevor-Roper asserted that Africa had not entered modern history prior to European contact and that the continent lacked any development of a civilization and must therefore undergo the process of pacification since the continent has become the white man's burden to bring enlightenment to it.¹²

The writings of colonial historiography were essentially a justification of slavery and imperialism under which the African continent was to be subjugated permanently and made subordinate to their European masters. Thus, the Hamitic hypothesis was developed which attempted to deny African independence even in the face of the struggle for independence. The hypothesis showed that the Africans cannot function independently without external stimuli from the Europeans. Thus the Africans were dehumanized in the European perspective of history.¹³ Exploitation and dominance affected European attitudes regarding African history; to justify European despoliation of the continent, everything primitive was associated with it; even slavery and colonization were justified as ways of "civilizing" the "primitive people." As a result, it's no surprise that African nationalists and the Pan-Africanist movement tried to restore Africa's past by studying and publishing African history by Africans.

In the same vein, the advent of Colonial historiography of India was a deliberate and intentional attempt on the part of the British not only to justify their rule but even to culturally

⁹ Cited in Dr. Binod Bihari Satpathy, Indian Historiography, Hist-Paper-VII Paper-VII DDCE/SLM/M.A.

¹⁰ B. N. Puri, “D. R Bhandarkar and Indian Historiography”, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress Vol.42(1981):35-41

¹¹ Vidya Hadagali, “Development of Colonial Historiography”. International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention. Vol 3.12 (2014):59-61

¹²See the contrast in B. Davidson, *The African Past: Chronicles from Antiquity to Modern Times*, London: Longman Group Limited, 1964, pp. 3-7.

¹³A.E. Afigbo, “Igboland Before 1800,” discusses the Hamitic hypothesis, in, O. Ikime, ed., *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, p. 74.

established the European supremacy. It was a part of what Kapil Kumar¹⁴ termed as the “colonial-psyche” and this colonial psyche worked in its most brutal forms to construct a colonial society. This they did by denying, denouncing and degrading the history, cultural heritage, religions, value systems, sciences, etc., of the subjugated. He argues that this psyche was a mix of Racism and the Western Supremacy assuming on itself what he described as White Man’s Burden to civilise Pagans, jungles and the natives in the colonies. The practitioners of this psyche were the colonial merchants, administrators, stake-holders of the Empire, British Intellectuals, Missionaries and soldiers – many of whom, turned out to be historians. In order to rule, dominate and subjugate the tactics adopted were to loot, plunder and divide at the ground level whereas at the intellectual level everything that India had stood for was to be denounced and demolished. Hence, the propaganda included Indians as uncultured, incompetent to rule, no history, divided, obscurantist religions, no nation, stagnant society and economy, slavery and oriental despotism. One may argue here that there were different perceptions and ideas about India like those of orientalists, utilitarians, indologists, etc. Yes, there were but they were part and parcel to construct and strengthen the Colonial Psyche. India suffered from one-sided skewed and inaccurate interpretations of history from Charles Grant, James Mill, and a host of others till 1947.

This is best articulated in the words of John Strachey: “This is the first and foremost thing to learn about India that there is not, and never was an India, or even any country of India possessing, according to European ideas, any sort of unity – physical, social and religious, no Indian nation, no ‘people of India’, of which we hear so much.”¹⁵

Though it can be argued, but a study by Kapil Kumar¹⁶ opines that the great revolutionary thinker Karl Marx was no exception in this regard as his entire analysis about India was based on British sources and information. Despite his opposition to colonialism and colonial exploitation, he observes the colonial mindset for what he claims is a replication of British propaganda. He clearly spelled out his own mindset in connection to India, describing India as a “stagnant society” whose stagnation was dissolved by colonization. He claims, as quoted from his words in a July 22, 1853 write-up to convey a clear image of his thinking, that “Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of the unresisting and unchanging society. The question, therefore, is not whether the English had a right to conquer India, but whether we are to prefer India conquered by the Turk, by the Persian, by the Russian, to India conquered by the Briton. England had to fulfill a double mission in India; one destructive, the other regenerating — the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Kapil Kumar, “Challenging Colonial Historiography : The Indian Scenario”, Maulana Azad Memorial Lecture 11th November, 2017.

¹⁵ Cited in Dileep Karanth, “India:One nation or Many Nationalities-Ancient Sources and Modern AnalysisHistory Today”, Journal of the Ind. History and Culture Society Vol. 7 (2006):1-11

¹⁶ Kapil Kumar, “Challenging Colonial Historiography: The Indian Scenario”, Maulana Azad Memorial Lecture 11th November, 2017.

¹⁷ Cited in, Kapil Kumar, “Challenging Colonial Historiography : The Indian Scenario”, Maulana Azad Memorial Lecture 11th November, 2017.

Further his attributes to India include: “passive existence, wild, aimless, unbounded forces of destruction, unresisting tools of superstitions, brutalizing worship, distinctions of caste and slavery, barbarian egotism, undignified, stagnant and vegetative life and never changing natural destiny”.

The Colonial mindset had been so successful at work that this great revolutionary thinker went so far as to write about it. “.....and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Hanuman, the monkey, and Sabbala, the cow.”

Thus, colonial historiography generally did not see African and Indian studies as the task of the historian but as the task of the anthropologists, and so much effort was channelled towards the conduct of tribal studies as Africans and Indians were seen as the “primitive tribes,” the “noble savages,” the “dark continent,” and many other negative portrayals and depersonalizations.

Another notable feature of colonial historiography was the influence of evolutionism in their writings. The idea of the European master race and supremacy loomed large in their presentation of Africa and India. Their accounts were thus, laced with bias, racism, and various prejudices.¹⁸

Historical Evidence and Colonial Historiography

Even though European scholars and philosophers such as G.W.F. Hegel, A.P. Newton, and others, have attempted to denigrate the Indian and African civilization and past, historical evidence in Africa has proved otherwise. As a result, African history has fought to prove that Africans were just as "civilized" as their European counterparts, with armies, governments, and empires. This is no longer discussed on the grand scale of works by persons like Seligman or Davidson, but rather on the level of minute research in state development and scale enlargement, which frequently dominate the literature in the subject. Thousands of pages have been published on the Ashanti people who established a state. More than that, African nations, like their European and Asian counterparts, were oppressive instruments in the hands of a ruling class that cared nothing for the lives and wellbeing of ordinary inhabitants, let alone the advancement of productive forces. These states faced the whole spectrum of resistance as well ranging from protest to revolution. Let us take an example from the kingdom of Kongo to illustrate this point.

The Kingdom of Kongo's intricate state structure demonstrated that Africans are civilized to their core and that the people understand the need of a well-run government. According to Basil Davidson, who based his account on seventeenth-century records of oral tradition, the kingdom was created in the fourteenth century by invaders from the north, who subdued the indigenous people, the Ambundu and Ambwela, and Kongo (Bakongo) made a point of getting along with them.¹⁹

Furthermore, Walter Rodney's seminal work in this area showed concrete examples of civilization, dynamism and development from ancient Egypt, Ethiopia, Nubia, the Maghreb, Western Sudan,

¹⁸F. Fukuyama discusses the impact of this theory in, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London: Penguin Books Limited, 1992, pp. 171-172.

¹⁹ Basil Davidson, *A History of East and Central Africa to the Late Nineteenth Century*, New York: Doubleday, 1969.

Zimbabwe, and others. In fact, the empire of Ghana flourished at a time when Europe was in the dark ages and in decadence. According to Walter Rodney, it was actually “European colonial bourgeois anthropologists whose philosophical outlook on “primitive societies” caused them to separate African society from its historical context.” Thus, the nature of their studies and work was subjective.²⁰

Indian historians attempted to establish the untruth of colonial historical narratives via research of existing historical sources as well as the search for new sources, just like African scholars attempted to refute European colonial writers. The colonial concept of India's spiritual tradition as a mark of uniqueness and of India's greatness and superiority over the West, especially in terms of 'moral values' as contrasted to the essentially 'materialistic' character of Western civilisation, was declared by Indian historians. At the same time, They disputed the Indians' only dedication to spirituality and emphasized their abilities in administration, statecraft, empire building, diplomacy, taxes, military organization, warfare, agrarian, industrial, and commercial growth. Many historians have uncovered diplomatic and political structures in India's history that are similar to those in modern Europe. They passionately refuted the idea that ancient Indians were inept at administering a state. They praised Kautilya's discovery of Arthashastra in the early twentieth century, saying it demonstrated that Indians were equally interested in and capable of state administration, diplomacy, and economic management. They also debunked the notion that the ancient Indian polity was dictatorial and authoritarian. They said that the kings of ancient India delivered justice to everybody. Others disputed the notion that Indian kings were unconcerned with the people's wellbeing. Some even claimed that the state had a significant popular element, even going so far as to imply that the political system in many ways resembled that of modern democracies. In any event, they all claimed that the government was not reckless and arbitrary. Few writers, such as Chandra Gupta, Akbar, and Shivaji, went so far as to mention the presence of assemblies and parliaments, as well as the cabinet system. The widespread respect of international law by rulers, particularly in cases of war, was frequently emphasized. They refuted the claim that Indian monarchs used arbitrary taxing, claiming that a system of taxation that was nearly identical to current taxation prevailed.

K.P. Jayaswal, a well-known historian from the first quarter of the twentieth century, brought this technique to its logical conclusion. He maintained in his 1915 book *Hindu Polity* that the ancient Indian political system was either republican or constitutional monarchy. 'The constitutional development made by the Hindus has very certainly not been equaled, much less surpassed, by any ancient society,' he concluded. (This was in response to the European perception that Greece was the birthplace of democracy.)

Fundamentally, the nationalist position was that everything that was politically favorable in the West already existed in India. Colonial historians emphasized that Indians were always divided by religion, area, language, and caste, that colonialism was the only thing that brought them together, and that their unity would vanish if colonial control ended. Indians lacked a sense of patriotism and national togetherness as a result of this. Nonetheless, nationalist historians argued that in pre-colonial India, cultural, economic, and political unity, as well as a feeling of Indian nationhood, persisted. They claimed that Kautilya, for example, had argued for a national ruler in the *Arthashastra*. This need to reaffirm India's previous unity explains why Indian historians tended to

²⁰W. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Abuja: Panaf Books Limited, 2005, p. 85.

see Indian history as a history of Indian empires and their disintegration, and why the age of empires was presented as a moment of national glory. Chandragupta Maurya, Asoka, Chandragupta Vikramditya, and Akbar were considered great because they founded huge empires, according to them.

To African history, oral traditions and literature were significant parts of the nature of history in the continent, a factor disputed and rejected by colonial historiography. So, the African reality preserved through narrative oral traditions, folklores, songs and chants, rituals, proverbs and wise sayings, poems, carvings and paintings, scarification's, and several indigenous forms of writings such as Nsibidi in Igboland, cannot be ignored in African historical reconstruction. This was the rich African historical heritage and evidence that was jettisoned by colonial historiography and even where they recognized these, modifications were made to fit in with the colonial accounts. Thus, pushing the narrative that Africa had no history due to the lack in written sources. The same narrative has been promoted in India. As stated previously, the colonialist scholars had laid claim that the Indians themselves have no history nor do they write history. However, some scholars, particularly nationalist intellectuals, have refuted the myth that India has no history, and have made some fair and sensible conclusions on the matter at hand. Maurice Winternitz, a German scholar, writes in support of the ancient Indians' historical understanding and historical texts "...one must not believe as it has so often been asserted that the historical sense is entirely lacking in the Indians. In India too there has been historical writing and in any case we find in India numerous accurately dated inscriptions which could hardly be the case if the Indians have had no sense of history at all. It is only truth that the Indians in their writings of history never knew how to keep fact and fiction strictly apart, that to them the facts themselves were always more important than their chronological order, and they attached no importance at all especially in literary matters to the question of what was earlier or later. He also says that ancient Indian literature has a wealth of historical information that is an important addition to classical Greek and Roman literature.

Also, A. B. Keith is perfectly right in stating that "To the old complaint that India has not historians and no historical sense it has recently been objected, doubtless with a measure of truth, that there is certain amount of writing and a number of facts attesting a degree of sense for history. In view of the antiquity and the developed character of Indian civilization it would indeed be ridiculous to expect to find India destitute of historical sense..." However, his assertions that "despite the riches of its literature, history is so horribly portrayed, and that there is not a single writer who can be legitimately considered as a critical historian throughout the entire great period of Sanskrit literature" are not entirely right. He does acknowledge, however, that certain historical and semi-historical works were created in ancient India. According to him, the Puranic genealogies, the Jains' *Pattavlis*, and the Buddhist texts are all historically significant. In his opinion, the biographical writings of Vakapatiraja Padmagupta, Bilhana, and others are of higher historical significance. In his judgment, and that of others, the chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir is the closest approximation to history. And its author, Kalhana, is described as a "real historian" who, in his opinion, is not a good match for Herodotus. We completely agree with him that Kashmiri historians have made significant contributions to the development of professional history. He points out that in ancient India, the national sentiment, which is a significant assistance to the recording of history, was not awakened. Because of the lack of such sentiments, the political events that occurred in India up to the twelfth century AD, including foreign invasions and conflicts and battles between competing dynasties and empires, were not documented by its ancient historians.

The battles and fights amongst native kings are mentioned in several ancient Indian historical texts; however, foreign invasions were not documented by ancient Indian historians, which may be due to the lack of relevant sources in India at the time, rather than a lack of national sentiment among them.

A.K Warder, a great authority on Indian historiography, has strongly advocated the historical sense of the ancient Indians. He has presented in his work abundant proofs of historical writings in ancient India. He says that it is superficial misconceptions that ancient India produced little or no historical literature. He has firmly established that there was continuity in historiographical tradition in ancient India from Vedic antiquity to the twelfth century AD.

Colonial historiography presented the notion of a pre-colonial Indian and African society as one which is in constant instability, lack of social harmony, and morally inferior to the Europeans. However, in the context of African history, it has demonstrated that through the slave raids in the continent to the liberation struggles in Algeria, Kenya, Mozambique, Angola, Guinea Bissau, Namibia, and others, that it was contact with European imperialists and colonizers especially those with the authoritarian or totalitarian ideologies, that led to the destruction, instability, disharmony and misery in the African continent. So, on that premise, Africa held and stood on higher moral ground and could be described in the period as morally superior to the European colonial order.²¹ Another colonial historiographical theory that was in contra-distinction to the historical evidence in Africa and even in India was the Hamitic hypothesis which attempted to present the colonies as vulnerability and incapacity without European intervention and stimuli. This was a blatant move to deny them their measure of freedom, self-determination and independence and permanently subjugate them to the vagaries of colonialism and imperialism. However, both Africa and Indiansocieties have functioned with dynamism, movement, progress and development at their own pace for several millennia before the contact with the Europeans.²²

Furthermore, colonial historiography remains an unreliable guide in the study of Indian and African history as part of its assumptions were coloured by the theory of evolution. This biological and racio-ethnic conception of history was misleading and meant to portray the Indians and Africans as inferior to the superior blood of the European “master race.” For instance, when this theory was adopted into practice in the African continent, it led to the system of apartheid in South Africa which was resented by the whole world. Thus, the series of prejudices, bias, distortions, and stereotyping of the Indians and Africans poses a real challenge in adopting the colonial accounts, records and methods in an effort to carry out the objective reconstruction of their .²³

Indeed, pre-literate African societies were not given their deserved attention in the colonial accounts and records as they were regarded as tribal societies in their primordial stage, with exotic cultures and mannerisms which was in line with the evolutionist idea of stagist developmentalism.²⁴ Therefore, African history continued to suffer under European imperialist-colonialist perspectives even up to the second half of the 20th century.

²¹Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa...* pp. 108-112.

²²A.E. Afigbo, “Igboland Before 1800,” pp.73-82.

²³See T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History, Second Edition*, London: The Macmillan Press, 1978, pp. 253-254.

²⁴Fukuyama, *The End of History* pp. 297-298. See also A.A. Boahen, *Perspectives on Colonialism*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, pp. 22-27. See also Udoka, I.A., “History and the

Although it took a long time to convince historians trained in the western tradition of usage of huge written sources to accept the unwritten sources of African history, they remain the pivot for the beginning of any meaningful form of historical research and writing. For they provide great evidence of immense contributions to the writing of the history of many societies. **These societies include not only Africa, but also in India where relics, dated stelae, carvings and drawings, ruins, and the activities of court historians, oral artists and poets, have been utilized in the reconstruction of history.**²⁵

It is through the effective harnessing of the advantages inherent in the unwritten sources of African history that helped the work of scholars such as Joseph Greenberg in his study of Africa, C.K. Meek's ethnographical work, Henry Barth's historical research in Nigeria and elsewhere, and the writings of anthropologists which all stem from the usage of the rich material evidence in unwritten African source materials. Rupert East and Daniel Akiga's reconstruction of the early history, culture and society of the Tiv of Central Nigeria was also hugely based upon unwritten sources, as was Saburi O. Biobaku's work on the Yoruba of South-west Nigeria.²⁶

A historian's foremost methods of research into the past involves the use of oral traditions, the asking of questions, interactions with members of the society in question, and the notice of evidence from auxiliary sources, so that what may later be acclaimed as written and documented history so hugely promoted by colonial historiography is collected from these oral and physical materials of society.

African history is a great example of the vitality of these unwritten sources, and the system of historical documentation on paper according to western standards even started early on the continent. Most of the early historical developments that have been recorded were generated from the unwritten sources as evidenced from the works of Africanist historians such as Kenneth Dike, Yusufu Bala Usman, J.F. Ade Ajayi, Elizabeth Isichei, J.D. Fage, Abdullahi Smith, Jan Vansina, and others.²⁷ It is noteworthy to state that the already documented history of many African societies by colonial historians and anthropologists in most cases has been heavily laced with bias, so by using corroborative evidence from the rich reservoir of unwritten African sources of history, a more meaningful and objective account of a society's history can be reconstructed.

In addition, the overall record of the life of societies has not been exhaustively written, and the unwritten sources of Africa and Indian history can help the historian's craft in developing the history of such societies for their entrance into the realm of historical and intellectual study. In this

Challenge of Underdevelopment in the 21st Century Africa," in, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 16, 2005-2006, p. 72.

²⁵ See for example, the work of R.A. Kohan, ed., *The Human Experience*, Columbus: Merrill Publishing Company, 1977, pp. 1-3.

²⁶ Y.B. Usman cites S.O. Biobaku's *Sources of Yoruba History*, London: Clarendon Press, 1973, in, G. Kwanashie, A. Abba, et. al., eds., *Beyond Fairy Tales: Selected Historical Writings of Yusufu Bala Usman*, Zaria: Abdullahi Smith Centre, 2006, pp. 4-5.

²⁷ J. Vansina's work, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, is instructive here. Cited in, I. Yongo and M.T. Tsenongo, "The Oral Artist as Historian," in, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2004, p. 73.

case, as opposed to the obstacles and hindrances of colonial historiography, the production of history through unwritten sources becomes not only possible and essential, but also imperative to the needs of human development.

The limitations of the unwritten sources have not gone without the notice of historians, however, and for purposes of objectivity and credibility, the comprehensive and complementary usage of all available sources has been the most scientific approach in the annals of historiography. In the case of oral traditions, the problem of time and chronology has remained a teething challenge. This has been the same case with archaeological sources especially in Africa where large areas are yet to be covered by its work. The oral traditions of a society are also based upon human memory which is subject to failure in the long run.²⁸

To understand the society better and place it in its proper perspective, the historian adopts concepts and theories, and writing and documentation becomes necessary so that this systematic approach to the study of history could be easily referred to periodically. The essence of modern and contemporary history of Africa and India has been to produce a record of society that would have permanence and transcend itself, and therefore the unwritten sources alone may not completely fulfil this objective. Jan Vansina has also noted what he described as “the vague and generalized nature of the unwritten source category of oral poetry.”²⁹

This historiographical approach and strategy of complementarity in the usage of source materials involving both indigenously based unwritten African sources and colonial sources has been an invaluable asset to the historian’s craft. For example, the written sources are a greater form of communication that progresses from generation to generation and covers a much broader scope and outreach over large geographical areas than the unwritten sources which are somehow restricted to particular areas, cultures and societies. Thus, supplementation of both sources remains the key to overall reconstruction of Africa and Indian history.³⁰

Conclusion

Colonial historiography was essentially anthropological and anthropology was a child and tool of colonialism and the capitalist-imperialist system. Therefore, the perspective of the Indian and African history under the eyes of this historiography was highly subjective rather than objective. The ideologies, philosophical ideas and theories of the European imperialists interfered significantly with their judgment of historical events and developments in India and Africa. So, these societies were presented as static and the proliferation and variety of state systems, of complex forms of exchange and social stratification, and evidence of advanced forms of material art were ignored. It was the attempt to restore both the Indian and African historical past, dignity and glory, that nationalist historiography emerged as a counter-ideology to challenge the tenets of colonial historiography in order to reassert historical consciousness. The notable Indian writers who had championed this are writers such as U.N.Ghoshal, A.D. Pusalker, R.C.Majumdar, R. C. Dutt, Radha Kumud mookherji, Radha Kamal Mukherjee and Romila Thapar while the African writers are the the likes of Edward Blyden, J.E. Casely-Hayford, Kenneth Onwuka Dike, J.F. Ade Ajayi, Saburi Biobaku, A.B. Horton, Walter Rodney, and Ali A. Mazrui. From the period of

²⁸ Vansina’s work, *Oral Tradition...*

²⁹ Emphasis mine, see Yongo and Tsenongo, “The Oral Artist as Historian... pp. 72-73.

³⁰ Vansina, *Oral Tradition...* cited in Yongo and Tsenongo, “The Oral Artist as Historian... pp. 71-73.

nationalist struggle to the attainment of independence by India in 1948 and most African countries in the second half of the 20th century was crucial to the success of this new historiographical order and the freedom of the continent became its crowning glory.

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