

HISTORIANS' ROLE IN THE DECOLONISATION OF AFRICA

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Abstract

African history during the period between the 19th and 20th centuries is about the colonization of the continent by Europe. Africa was one of the overseas battlegrounds for the seven imperialist powers involved in supremacy battle in Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. (The powers were Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Belgium and Portugal). The battle prostrated Europe for most of those centuries. Fortunately, by seizing and colonizing overseas territories, the contending powers were able to save Europe and, by extension, Western civilization, from destruction. Colonial rule in Africa was three-pronged---it was physical, economic and psychological. With regard to the psychological, the colonialists distorted history with a view to softening the natives up for the physical and the economic. Using nationalism as framework, this paper discusses the role by historians in the decolonization of the continent. Data were gleaned from various different secondary sources, Sources and Traditions of African Historiography, Nigeria: Background to Nationalism, Africa in History, The Black Man's Burden, The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa, Perspectives and Methods of Studying African History, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, Races of Africa, A Study of History, Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century's, etc.

Keywords: African history, colonial rule, Africa, historian.

Introduction

Colonialism was the fad of the four centuries between the 16th and the 20th centuries. It has been defined in many different ways. It involves the invasion of the colonized peoples as it is defined as "a relationship between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders" (Osterhammel, 2005, p.16). It also involves the exploitation of the resources of the colonized people for the benefit of their colonizers: "Colonization is the practice by which a powerful country directly controls less powerful countries and uses their resources to increase its own power and wealth" (*Collins English Dictionary* 11th ed., 2011). Furthermore, it involves attempts to recreate the colonized peoples in the image of

their colonizers: “The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convinced of their own superiority and their ordained mandate to rule” (Osterhammel, 2005, p.16). A European enterprise, it was triggered by the serendipitous discovery of the New World (the Americas) by Christopher Columbus in 1492 and was pioneered by the Iberian empires---Spain and Portugal. *Colony*, its root word, means “a country or an area that is governed by people from another, more powerful country” (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*^{9th} ed., 2015). Advocates of colonialism/imperialism justified it with the myth of the superiority of European civilization. One such advocate, Rudyard Kipling (an imperialist poet), in 1899 wrote a poem titled “The White Man's Burden” in which he proposed that “the white race is morally obliged to civilize the non-white peoples of planet Earth, and encourage their progress (economic, social, and cultural) through colonialism” (Wikipedia). In the first stanza of the poem, the subject peoples were called “Half devil and half child”.

Africa was one of the regions that were colonized by Europe. According to Lugard (1922), rivalry between Germany and France for overseas colonies, following France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, played far greater role than any other factor in instigating the partition of the continent. Africans never accepted their colonization by Europeans. They fought against it but were defeated. Their defeat, however, did not deter them from fighting to regain their freedom. Their struggle took different forms and involved various groups. One such neocolonialist group, made of historians, refuted the racist denial of Africa's past and the Eurocentric idealization and glorification of Western civilization. Some of the historians were historians by training, for example, Kenneth Dike, Ade Ajayi and Adu Boahen; others were historians by inclination. Whatever their status, they did not allow the Eurocentric historians to get away with their deliberate representation of Africa as a historical nothingness prior to its contact with Europeans. This paper discusses the role of the African historians in the decolonization of their continent.

Colonization of Africa

Africa was effectively colonized for about 60 years (from the turn of the 20th century until the 1960s), South and Central America for about 500 years (from the 16th century until the 20th century), India (then comprised of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) for about 200 hundred years (from 1757 until 1947). Prior to effective (formal) colonization, Africa was informally colonized by chartered companies; for example, the territories that in time would become Nigeria were administered by Taubman Goldie's Royal Niger Company from July

1886 until 1 January 1900 when it transferred its territories to Britain for \$865, 000. The earliest treaties between Africans and Europeans were wangled by the chartered companies.

The colonization of the continent was preceded first by the Atlantic Slave Trade, and then the so-called Legitimate Trade. Ethiopia (then known as Abyssinia) is the only African country that was never colonized. Liberia was a resettlement colony of the United States. Rodney (2009, 247), who was implacably dismissive of its supposed benefits, said that it “had only hand-[that] it was a one-armed bandit.” The colonial powers adopted different policies towards their colonies. Britain adopted Indirect Rule, France Assimilation and Belgium Paternalism. Germany was stripped of her 6 colonies (Togo, Cameroon, Namibia, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi) following its defeat in the First World War. Togo and Cameroons were transferred to France, Namibia to South Africa, Tanzania to Britain and Burundi and Rwanda to Belgium. The Ottoman Empire lost its colonies too. Those colonies confiscated from Germany and the Ottoman Empire was renamed *mandated territories*.

Africa (one of the three continents that made up the Old World) was derogatorily called the “Dark Continent”, not because its interior was largely uncharted prior to its colonization but because of the claim that it was a civilization backwater. Lugard (1922) noted “for the secrets of its peoples, its lakes, and mountains and rivers, have remained undisclosed not merely to modern civilization, but through all the ages of which history has any record. There are many regions in Asia—in Persia, Assyria, Arabia, and Western China—in which modern explorers have claimed to have made discoveries. But all these countries were the seats of ancient civilizations, some of them highly developed, and exploration was concerned rather with piecing together chapters of past history than in discovery. The penetration into the interior of Africa, on the other hand, may as truly be described as discovery as that of America by Columbus” (p. 1).

Nationalism in Africa

Nationalism is described as “the desire by a group who share the same race, culture, language, etc. to form an independent country” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary 9th ed.). It is the opposite of colonialism (imperialism). According to Kohn (2024), Throughout history people have been attached to their native soil, to the traditions of their parents, and to established territorial authorities, but it was not until the end of the 18th century that nationalism began to be a generally recognized sentiment molding public and private life and one of the great, if not the greatest, single determining factors of modern history. Because of its dynamic vitality and its all-pervading character, nationalism is often thought to be very old; sometimes it is mistakenly regarded as a permanent factor in political behavior. Actually, the American and French revolutions may be regarded as its first powerful manifestations. After penetrating the new countries of Latin America, it spread in

the early 19th century to central Europe and from there, toward the middle of the century, to eastern and southeastern Europe. At the beginning of the 20th century, nationalism flowered in Asia and Africa. Thus, the 19th century has been called the age of nationalism in Europe, while the 20th century witnessed the rise and struggle of powerful national movements throughout Asia and Africa.

African nationalism was either violent or peaceful. Some of the colonies where it was violent were Algeria, Kenya, Angola and Mozambique; some of the colonies where it was peaceful were Nigeria, Ghana and Zambia. Independence negotiations in the colonies in the latter category were conducted convivially over buffet and cups of coffee or tea in cozy conference halls. African nationalism is also divisible into traditional and modern nationalism. The former includes the initial resistance by Africans to Western penetration and occupation, while the latter, according to Coleman (1958), included sentiments, activities, and organizational developments that explicitly sought self-government and independence. The factors that galvanized it were the Western economic forces, Christianity and European missionaries, Western education and the Westernized elite (Coleman, 1958). The fifth factor was the black Diaspora in Europe and North/ Central America. African nationalism owes much to this factor. Many nationalist leaders (for example, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Kwame Nkrumah and Leopold Senghor) studied in Europe or the United States at the time Black movements were agitating for racial equality in those places. They returned to their respective countries with not only the degrees they acquired but also the contagious inspiration to demand independence for their peoples. The Diaspora agitated for the decolonization of their ancestral continent within the context of Pan Africanism--- “the expression of a desire for African unity...an expression of a sense of unity between peoples whose ancestors originally came from Africa” (Legum, 1966, 528). Pan-Africanism was inspired by the Diaspora (Olusanya, 1984). According to Davidson (1974), the leaders of the movement were concerned to abolish “all those artificial barriers against equality, and therefore against freedom, that racialism and imperialism had imposed.”

Among the earliest forms of African nationalism was the indigenization of churches whereby churches blending traditional African values with the Bible either separated from the parent churches or were founded independently. In Nigeria the first nationalist church was the United Native African Church which seceded from the Anglican Church in 1891. Such separatism was encouraged by the diaspora. According to Coleman (1958).

[s]ome of those sects had received encouragement from American Negro sects. Blyden's attitude was undoubtedly a reflection of such influence. Moreover, after the United Native African Church had been firmly established, American Negro clergymen visited Nigeria in 1899 and ordained the ministers of the new Church.

Many of the minor sects that came into being after the turn of the century, either by secession from a European church or as a spontaneously organized group, were the direct product of the encouragement of small American sects (white and Negro) which provided literature, hymn books, and leaflets. These separatist movements were remarkably early manifestation of protest against white domination and the status of inferiority (pp. 176-177).

Racist bias against African history

Perhaps, the greatest challenge facing history is that when it is written by the people themselves, it runs the risk of romanticism; by the same token, when it is written by others it runs the risk of distortion. This is one of the factors that predispose it to skepticism. The greatest tragedy to befall African history is that Westerners were the first people to systematically document it. In doing this, the pioneers used it to further the end of the imperialist agenda of their respective home countries. After all, “[h]istory], it must be remembered, has always been a powerful tool in the hands of rulers to legitimize their authority” (Uya, 1984, 3). In fact, historians (and anthropologists alike) played a critical role in softening Africans up for their eventual colonization. To a degree, they succeeded in inebriating the natives with a high dose of self-doubt, self-pity and self-rejection and a low dose of self-regard. Most parts of the continent prior to the colonization of the continent were not literate. As a consequence, the history of the peoples was transmitted through oral tradition. Uya (1984) posited that a combination of the Euro-centric perspective and over-dependence upon written documents as the only acceptable source for historical reconstruction had several consequences for African history.”

Colonization of Africa started off with the racist fallacy that the continent was a historical; and being so it was not part of civilization. Prominent among the Eurocentric aerialists were Georg Hegel, David Hume, C. G. Seligman, Arnold Toynbee and Hugh-Trevor Roper. Hegel and Hume corroboratively claimed that the continent was stagnant, with the result that it had never been part of civilization. Hegel ascribed his claim to intemperance and indulgence:

It was manifest that want of self-control distinguishes the character of the Negroes. This condition is capable of no development or culture, and as we have seen them at this day, such have they always been. At this point we leave Africa, not even to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit (quoted in Uya, 1984, 5).

Hume ascribed his to nature:

I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS, have still something eminent about them, in their valour, form of government, or some other particular. Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are NEGROE slaves dispersed all over EUROPE, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity; tho' low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession. In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly (quoted in Hutchison, 2020).

Seligman and Toynbee argued that the continent was motionless and incapable of autogenic development until it was bestirred from the without. Seligman claimed that the civilization that was found on the continent prior to its colonization by Europe was actuated by contact with the outside world:

A part from relatively late Semitic influence —whether Phoenician (Carthaginian) and strictly limited, or Arab (Muhammadan) and widely diffused—the civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites, its history the record of these peoples and of their interaction with the two more primitive African stocks, the Negro and the Bushman, whether this influence was exerted by highly civilized Egyptians or by such wilder pastoralist as are represented at the present day by the Beja and the Somali (1930, 96).

Similarly, Toynbee (1947), recognizing the Egyptian civilization as the only civilization that ever flourished on the continent, argued that the continent became a part of world history as a result of its colonization by Europe. The rest of the continent “faced no challenge, developed no civilizations, and are able to enter the stage of world history through the challenge of European colonial domination.”

Trevor-Roper, the renowned historian who did not see any reason to teach African history, wrote:

Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history (quoted in Badawi, 2017).

According to Agbodike (2004), there were two consequences of the mischievous denial of civilization in Africa. Firstly, the history of European expansion and interests on the continent “began to displace local history and tradition in the education of the African youth.” Secondly, European writers did not build their records on the existing African historical traditions based on orally transmitted historical events but rather challenged and supplanted them.”

Historians and Africa’s independence

African historians and historians of African descent in Europe and North/Central America did not watch from the sidelines as ‘the wind of change, blew over Africa. They did not shirk from the fray; rather they constituted themselves into a distinctive platoon in the struggle.

The struggle to rescue African history from Eurocentric denialists started in earnest during the 1950s. It was in the 1950s, when the first generation of Africans to acquire Western education emerged, that African history began to be documented by Africans themselves. (A.P. Newton said, “History begins when men begin to write.”). Some (for example, Kenneth Onwuka Dike and Ade Ajayi) were trained historians; others (for example, Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩwa Thiong'o) were otherwise; yet there were able to contribute very meaningfully to the effort to decolonize the African history. Whether trained or untrained, the historians were in the front line of nationalist agitation in their continent. Davidson (1994) wrote that African historians wrote because of “a failure of western historians to appreciate the culture and achievements of the non-European World.” They were aware that Westerners were only using history to justify colonialism. Uya said:

The agitation for African independence called for a new historical image within which the heralded benevolence of all European actors would be deflated. And as our historians stripped the truth the colonization of Africa had to be seen for what it was: naked imperialism designed to create the best atmosphere for the social, political and economic rape of Africa.

Dike fired one of the first salvos in 1956 with the publication of *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885: An Introduction to Economic and Political History of Nigeria*. Dike narrated how European merchants subverted the sovereignty of African kingdoms. According to Olusanya (1984) the efforts by these African historians, which were made through extensive research into the African past demolished the myth hitherto used as political and spiritual weapon by the whites to ensure the complete subservience of African. According to Agbodike (2004), there were two consequences of the mischievous denial of civilization in Africa. Firstly, the history of European expansion and interests on the continent “began to displace local history and tradition in the education of the African youth.” Secondly, “European writers did not build their records on the existing African

historical traditions based on orally transmitted historical events but rather challenged and supplanted them.”

Conclusion

Colonization of Africa started with colonization of its history. Africa was perhaps the only region where colonization involved distortion of history and denial of existence of civilization prior to physical colonization. Until now the premise for describing the continent as Dark Continent has not been explained. South America was colonized, but the colonizers never contested the existence of Aztec and other civilizations. However, vis-à-vis Africa, the civilizations were denied or attributed to stimulation by some external influence. The denialists were actuated by nothing but racism. The absence of written history does not mean the absence of history. After all, European history was once oral. History is a constituent element of human existence. Who a people have ever existed without history? None; so, it is preposterous that Eurocentric racists should dare to claim that Africa did not have a past. “If history begins when men begin to write” (A.P. Newton), it follows that every people, including those who argued that African history only started when the white men started to write it, did not have a past (history).

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