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Problems and issues in african historiography

The study presents African History from an African perspective, challenging the traditional European view that Africa had no civilization or history. This narrative is contradicted by significant achievements in ancient Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudanese empires, and other African civilizations. However, African historiography emerged only after World War II, with the nationalist movement driving its development. Despite Africa's current challenges, such as national integration, tribalism, economic development, conflicts, and terrorism, this study focuses on how African historiography should address these problems by incorporating them into the themes of African History. The module "Problems and Issues in African Historiography" aims to demonstrate that pre-colonial Africa had a respectable historical consciousness. Key challenges faced by African historiography include imperialistic denigration, century-long slavery, and colonization. By understanding these issues, students will be able to: 1. Evaluate the basis of Africa's denigration 2. Counter the image of Africa as a "dark continent" 3. Discuss pre-colonial African written and oral historiography 4. Demonstrate that rebirths of African civilizations are possible The field of African studies has been plagued by Eurocentric views, which have distorted the continent's rich history. Trevor Roper's infamous claim that there was no history in Africa except for the presence of Europeans is a prime example of this bias. He dismissed the idea of pre-colonial African societies as "barbarous tribes" and argued that their history was irrelevant. This perspective, shared by many European historians at the time, reinforced the notion that Africa needed "civilized" European culture to progress. The Hamitic Hypothesis further perpetuated this myth by claiming that Africans lacked the intelligence and skills to create magnificent works of art, instead attributing them to foreign visitors. As a result, African history was reduced to a mere narrative of European achievements in Africa. During the colonial period, European administrators and historians were more interested in gathering information for administrative purposes than in producing accurate historical accounts. Their ethnographers and anthropologists collected vast amounts of data, but it was not until after independence that these records began to be used to reconstruct African history. The legacy of this colonial historiography continues to shape our understanding of Africa's past. Its focus on the "civilizing mission" of European powers and the supposed lack of African agency in shaping their own destiny has contributed to a distorted narrative that neglects the complexities and achievements of pre-colonial societies. The grand purpose of European presence in Africa was economic exploitation. Colonial administrators commissioned anthropologists to study African cultures. These studies yielded valuable insights into pre-colonial societies, now studied by Indigenous historians. In ancient Egypt, a advanced civilization existed with hieroglyphics and papyrus. Alexandria was a centre for learning, attracting Greek philosophers like Plato. North Africa was part of the ancient Mediterranean world and medieval Islamic world until European conquest in the 19th Century. North African nationalist movements in the 1930s produced works challenging Eurocentric histories. In Ethiopia, East Africa, and West Africa, literacy spread, allowing written history. Chronicles of Ethiopian monks and Timbuktu scholars showcased a worldview linked to Christian and Islamic knowledge. African societies had a strong historical consciousness, denoted as "oral historiography". Tales of divine ancestors, genealogies, and epic events were passed down through generations by word of mouth or other methods. African elders were custodians of oral tradition and conduits of knowledge, transmitting it to their children. The preservation of customs and stories from one generation to another is crucial for any society's understanding of its past. The Griots were professional historians who lived in West Africa, particularly in countries such as Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, and Nigeria. They would use storytelling, singing, poetry, and music to document historical events, much like medieval troubadours in southern France. These skilled bards were often employed by kings and rulers, giving them a position of authority due to their role as advisors. Despite some concerns about the accuracy of these oral sources, historians agree that they provide valuable evidence of the past. Just like African monarchs before them, colonial administrators sought to understand the territories under their control for administrative purposes and economic gain. They employed ethnographers and anthropologists who collected a vast amount of historical data, which was stored in archives and libraries. However, this information was not always used to produce significant historical publications because anthropology was the dominant colonial science at the time. Instead, the focus was on documenting administrative structures, trade networks, invasion, and conquest. African societies had their own methods for preserving history, but they did not rely on written records like European societies did. This led to a biased view of African history, with many believing that Africa "had no history" because it was not documented in writing. A more nuanced approach is needed to understand the rich cultural heritage and historical experiences of pre-colonial Africa. The colonial period saw the production of numerous publications on African history, but they were often focused on administrative and economic aspects rather than providing a comprehensive understanding of the continent's past. These works may seem limited in scope today, but they still offer valuable insights into pre-colonial societies for modern historians to learn from. The perception of ancient Greece's history as well-established while African oral traditions were overlooked has been a contentious issue. One major flaw in colonial historiography is its skewed perspective, which predominantly reflects European thinking and understanding. The records of European travellers, traders, administrators, and missionaries dominated the narrative, often at the expense of authentic African experiences. The call for independence not only echoed across Nigeria but resonated throughout the African continent. This resurgence of interest in Africa's rich past garnered significant support from nationalist leaders across the region. Notable figures such as Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Leopold Sedar Senghor, and Julius Nyerere played pivotal roles in this movement. In an effort to dismantle European colonial intellectual dominance, African intellectuals began searching for alternative sources of historical interpretation. One prominent figure in this pursuit was Cheikh Anta Diop, whose work highlighted the significant connections between Egypt and the rest of Africa. This allowed the continent to lay claim to Ancient Egypt's rich legacy. During the peak of colonial rule, several indigenous historians produced a wealth of publications aimed at challenging misconceptions about the African past. These scholars had been educated in Western universities, where they were exposed to influential movements such as Black Power and Black Studies. Upon their return to Africa, they joined the teaching staffs of newly established university colleges, sparking a renewed focus on decolonizing historical narratives. One key figure driving this movement was Professor Kenneth O. Dike, a pioneer of "Oral Historiography." He believed that by systematically analyzing oral histories and supplementing them with written evidence from archaeology and other disciplines, African history could be effectively resurrected. As the first African Director of a History Department at University College Ibadan, he paved the way for the new generation of African historians. The rediscovery of Africa's pre-colonial past brought old civilizations back into the spotlight, giving new value to African culture and art. This rebirth was championed by Dike, who helped revive ancient kingdoms, unearth cultural heroes, and showcase achievements across various fields. Another crucial development in African historiography was the establishment of archives, spearheaded by Professor Dike's initiative in Nigeria. He created one national archive in each of the country's three regions, ensuring that public records were preserved and made accessible. This new focus on archival materials marked a significant shift in how historians approached their craft. As African nations gained independence, a distinct historiography emerged, driven by the need to rewrite history from an African perspective. Scholars known as Africanists sought to showcase the continent's past, distancing themselves from colonial narratives and instead focusing on the experiences of African peoples. This new approach prioritized themes relevant to the growth of new state structures, with historians celebrating the achievements of nationalists and crafting national histories that stretched back into Africa's distant past. However, this shift also raised questions about the reliability of oral tradition in reconstructing authentic history. This challenge presented an opportunity for Africanists to make original contributions to historical methodology, navigating the complexities that arose from using non-traditional sources like oral history, linguistics, and archaeology. Historians sought to reconstruct Africa's past through non-written sources. They addressed challenges via historical societies and publications that shared conference proceedings. A UNESCO-backed General History of Africa in eight volumes showcased global expertise, combining written records with oral evidence, archaeology, and cultural insights. This shift diminished the Eurocentric perspective in African historical research. Historiography problems were tackled by forming historical societies and publishing bulletins and journals that shared regional and international seminar proceedings. The culmination of this effort was a UNESCO-sponsored General History of Africa, comprising eight volumes featuring contributors from various continents. The unique strength of these volumes lay in the expertise of their authors, who drew upon written records, oral testimonies, archaeological findings, cultural, and linguistic evidence to buttress their positions. Historical research on Africa has seen significant change since then. Much of the Eurocentric worldview has disappeared from recent studies. In contrast, historians today believe that change is crucial in understanding the past. The colonial period was dominated by anthropology, with a mistaken notion of time prevalent among anthropologists. They saw African societies as static and unchanging. However, the Africanists challenged this view by highlighting conquests, state formation, and trade migrations. To preserve their history, African peoples relied on oral tradition, which historians later validated using methodological guidelines from Jan Vansina's work "Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology." Scholars have successfully applied oral tradition as a dependable historical source for reconstructing African community histories. Examples of pioneering works include Professor S.O. Biobaku's "The ne:Egba and Their Neighbours," E.J. Alagoa's "A History of the Niger Delta," and B.A. Ogot's "History of the Southern Luo." Moreover, Ibn Khaldun was a renowned North African historian who extensively covered Africa in his work. Despite this, Western scholars overlooked him, allowing Herodotus to hold the title of "the father of history" instead. A wealth of Muslim and Arab sources has been accumulated in Africa since the 7th century AD. These resources would have been highly valuable to European historians seeking to reconstruct African history if they had only acknowledged their significance. Notable Arab geographers and historians like Al Bakri, Ibn Battuta, and others left extensive records detailing their experiences in Africa. Moreover, the writings of Africans who were Muslims and composed their works within the Islamic tradition are also noteworthy. These individuals, such as Rahman Al-Sadi, author of Tarik-as-Sudan,' provided a unique perspective on African societies that is still invaluable to historians today. In contrast to European writers, Muslim travellers and traders were deeply embedded in the societies they documented, particularly in the Sudanic Belt of Africa. Their works offer a distinctive viewpoint on African history that complements the Eurocentric narrative prevalent at the time. This was exemplified by H. F. C. Smith, who later became Abdullahi Smith after converting to Islam, and his work at University College Ibadan. Smith challenged the prevailing assumption of growing European influence in West Africa during the 19th century and instead argued that this idea had been grossly overstated. Abdullahi Smith established a new school of thought that utilized Arabic sources to reinterpret West African history. Murray Last expanded on this work by collecting over 10,000 Arabic manuscripts to establish the Northern History Research Scheme. This initiative provided essential resources for a new generation of Nigerian historians, including Yusufu Bala Usman and Abdullahi Mahadi, who went on to contribute significantly to decolonizing African history. In parallel with these efforts, historian John Hunwick initiated the Centre for Arabic Documentation at the University of Ibadan in 1964. This centre aimed to collect and publish Arabic writings from across Africa, resulting in a seven-volume encyclopaedia of Arabic writings in Africa that has yet to be fully explored by historians and philosophers. The manuscript tradition within Islam is as ancient as the faith itself, underscoring the rich historical heritage waiting to be uncovered through these neglected sources. In the early centuries, a valuable treasure trove of Islamic sciences emerged in Africa, offering valuable insights into the region's history. At the dawn of the 21st century, scholarship underwent a significant shift with the advent of digitization, online databases, and interconnected portals. This transformation redefined how knowledge about Islamic history is generated, accessed, and utilized. Lesson Three: Limitations of Muslim and Arab Sources * Overemphasis on Islam's role in African societies * Only Muslim kings are praised, while non-Muslim ones receive little attention * Records often portray decay, decline, and turmoil when Islam's fortunes wane * Eight limitations were identified by Ibn Khaldun: + A taste for the marvelous + Muslim prejudice + Confidence in accounts' transmission + Presumption + Desire to gain favor with influential figures + Ignorance of politics and cultural context + Personal ignorance of events' circumstances These sources are primarily confined to areas directly affected by Muslim activities, such as the Sudanic Belt, East Africa, coastal regions, and North Africa. Despite their limitations, Arabic sources remain crucial for decolonized historiography. HIS 307: Problems and Issues in African Historiography (Module 6) - Inter-Disciplinary Approach African historians have influenced other social sciences by recognizing precolonial societies' dynamic nature and interconnectedness of socio-cultural and religious life. Social anthropologists also emphasize harmony in African worldview. This has led to an inter-disciplinary approach, incorporating disciplines like Archaeology, Historical Linguistics, Anthropology, Ethnography, Art History, and more. Together with oral tradition, these disciplines complement each other. Lesson One: Archaeology Archaeology is the study of past cultures through excavation and material remains examination. It provides insights into how societies adapted to their environment or modified it to suit their lifestyle. Information is obtained through archaeological excavations, providing valuable knowledge about African history. Archaeology's Significance in African History Reconstruction The field of archaeology plays a vital role in reconstructing African history, particularly through radio-carbon dating. The technique has significantly contributed to our understanding of the continent's past. Famous sites such as Ife works of art and Igbo Ukwu bronze artefacts have provided valuable insights into the lives of ancient civilizations. Sociological factors can limit a historian's access to information. Additionally, archaeology requires knowledge from various disciplines like chemistry, botany, geology, art, history, etc., making interpretation challenging due to the difficulty in finding an expert with such diverse expertise. Furthermore, archaeology relies heavily on oral traditions and written sources, which can be unreliable or incomplete. Archaeology is often paired with historical linguistics to reconstruct early African history. Historical linguists contribute by establishing genetic relationships between languages and tracing the origins of individual words. This involves comparing grammar, vocabulary, and phonology across different languages to establish connections. By studying language evolution over time, historians can gain insight into the adoption of new ideas. The study of historical linguistics has several advantages in reconstructing African history: it helps identify the origin of ethnic groups, confirms or questions stories of origin, and identifies distinct ethnic groups through language. For instance, linguistic studies have confirmed that the Ewes once lived with the Yoruba before settling in Ghana. Language plays a crucial role in identifying people's identity. The connections between societies can be illuminated through linguistics. The presence of similar words suggests interactions between people who were not previously linked. For instance, Akan words for governance and daily life are found in Ga language, while Mande-origin words appear in Twi and other West African languages. Additionally, linguistic analysis reveals the influences that have come from outside, such as Portuguese loanwords like "paano" (bread), "bokiti" (bucket), "asopatre" (slippers), "krataa" (paper), and "prete" (plate) in Ghanaian languages. However, historical linguistics has its limitations. Firstly, it is challenging to study a language without prior knowledge of it, leading to potential misinterpretation. Secondly, linguistic analysis may not accurately track changes over time, which can result in the distortion or loss of historical accuracy. Thirdly, linguistics is less developed in Africa, limiting its contributions to reconstructing African history. Furthermore, conclusions drawn from word similarities may be coincidental, making it difficult to establish conclusive evidence. Despite these challenges, linguists are increasingly focusing on African history, and recent studies have shed new light on the topic. by Africanist historians using models that explore cultural change through time Looking forward to the meeting tomorrow, where we'll see everyone and discuss our strategies in detail. This year's Honors seminar on contemporary Africa presents a challenging pedagogical dilemma for me as an instructor. Since I don't have a prerequisite course, students come with varying levels of prior knowledge, forcing me to approach the subject without making any assumptions. This is a common issue for Africanists across institutions, particularly in courses that aim for advanced, challenging content. While the program's core concept emphasizes rigorous, engaging discussions, I often find myself struggling to balance depth and breadth. Some students excel at analyzing complex topics like colonial societies' roles or indirect rule's contradictions but may falter when distinguishing between specific countries like Togo and Botswana. Redesigning syllabi is difficult due to external examiners, who must accommodate diverse student groups over two years, requiring a stable curriculum that applies equally to both. I've traditionally relied on broad, influential texts supplemented by thought-provoking books and articles for discussion. However, I'm now in a "gap year" and see this as an opportunity to overhaul my approach. My current strategy involves covering significant periods or themes with a mix of required readings, debates, and discussions. A possible redesign could involve either focusing on southern Africa's history or exploring the broader context of the British Empire. One central axis of discussion has been "What makes modern African history distinct?" while another focuses on using African history to analyze modern imperialism and its connections to modernity. However, both approaches pose challenges: the first risks implicit comparison to premodern Africa and other societies, while the latter demands engagement with debates not limited to African examples. A "smaller" approach could lead to region-specific parochialism and practical limitations in securing examiners from diverse fields. In contrast, a more focused strategy enables students to develop expertise in high-level historiographical debates and comfortable, location-specific questions about historical events. I'm looking for ways to improve our seminar on colonial Africa by having students comfortable with specific knowledge of places, times, and events. I've been thinking about what makes African history intellectually distinctive and how we can organize the course around a single big theme rather than covering everything. One idea is to focus on the methodological and epistemological differences that historians approach in studying Africa. This could involve exploring the challenges of working with oral narratives, archival interpretations, and debates over nomothetic and ideographic knowledge. Another possibility is to examine how colonialism and globalization affect African societies differently compared to other regions. We could also delve into the unique struggles faced by many African societies within contemporary global systems, investigating their marginality and potential solutions.