



African Historiography (pt. 1)

Week Eight Lectures



John Donnelly Fage

- Born in England - 1921-2002
- Attended Cambridge, where he wrote his PhD in 1949, titled "The Achievement of Self-Government in Southern Rhodesia, 1898-1923"
- He promptly left the UK and joined the history faculty at the University of the Gold Coast (now called the University of Ghana)
 - He taught there for 10 years
- After Ghana's independence in 1957, he left for the UK, where he taught at SOAS, and the University of Birmingham.
- He was the founder of the Journal of African History, and he edited the 1975-1986 Cambridge History of Africa
- He became a prominent scholar of West Africa

Philip D. Curtin

- Born in Philadelphia - 1922-2009
- He earned his PhD from Harvard in 1953 on "Revolution and Decline in Jamaica, 1830-1865"
- He taught primarily at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (1956-1975), with Jan Vansina.
 - This remains one of the top African History Programmes
- He then Left and taught at Johns Hopkins from 1975 until his death.
- He is one of those scholars who started studying the Atlantic Slave Trade and gradually moved to studying African History. He also was a great statistician of the slave trade.

Fage - "The Development of African Historiography"

- First, Fage maintains the Sub-Saharan-North Africa divide. This is very crucial and somewhat problematic.
- Arabic-language scholars were continually engaging in the study of Africa even as early as c.950 AD.
 - Much of these were histories of Islam in Africa, or histories of regions where Islam is prominent.
 - This included the Sahara and Sahel
- Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) was one of these historians who originally wrote in Arabic.
 - His work was actually quite influential towards the development of Marc Bloch's *Annales* School.
 - He also did not regard all documentation as equal (re: Empiricism & von Ranke)
 - He also had a philosophy of historical change in the Sahara & Sahel which resonated similarly to the Annales school, taking seriously long-term change & the environment re: the Berbers

Fage - "The Development of African Historiography"

- Furthermore, Ethiopia developed its own body of historical writing quite early, but it was limited to Ethiopia because of the limited knowledge of Ge'ez, its religious and administrative script.
- Missionaries also began to pioneer some level of historical writing in Africa from the 1500s. In Fage's words missionaries "had a positive compulsion to try to change what they found, and perhaps some understanding of African history was a useful asset to them" (29).
- Quite a lot of the knowledge produced by the missionaries dealt with not just the areas they were working in (West Africa), but also as it related to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the politics therein.
- Travellers accounts became quite prominent, especially by the 1700s and 1800s. While these accounts are often problematic, repeating racists notions, they are not completely void of historical value.

Fage - "The Development of African Historiography"

- Nevertheless, a deep racist attitude permeated Histories of Africa, and especially philosophy regarding "race", "culture", and "Civilization"
- Hegel: History is about Change, because Africa is "static" - Africa has no history.
 - Oxford Professor: "Perhaps in the future, there will be some African History to teach."
- Many historians and visitors to Africa continued to believe in the Hamitic myth, as well as the notion that all progress in Africa came from outside intervention.
 - Historians would gradually challenge this.
- Belief in the Hamitic Myth often justified colonial conquest, and furthermore, it explained (in the eyes of racist observers of Africa), why said conquest was successful.
 - Much of this had to do with ethnocentric conceptions of civilization.
 - This was also simply historically unfactual.
 - Nevertheless, the hamitic myth still persists today, both in "reasoned" historical discourse and informal belief by Africans and Europeans themselves today.

Fage - "The Development of African Historiography"

- Throughout the 1930s-1950s, many British scholars began the *Cambridge Histories of the British Empire*, a twelve volume set of which only a few chapters are dedicated to Africa (beyond South Africa).
 - While this was slightly more mature scholarship than the racist Hamitic Myth Work, it nevertheless repeats many Eurocentric tropes and treats Africa just as a setting for European histories. Colonial History and African History are Different.
- With that being said, some colonialists and members of the Empire were indeed inquisitive people, "who sought to find out and to set down the history of those that they had come to rule" (39). We must look at colonial histories and the writings of colonialists with suspicion, but it doesn't mean that these histories are completely without value.
- By the 1940s, as especially with African independence and the development of African Universities since the 1960s, Africans themselves have begun to take command.

Curtin: "Recent Trends in African Historiography"

- Curtin tries to show that the neglect of African History until recent years is symptomatic of trends in historical writing at large.
 - In a large way, this means treating European knowledge and European histories as the norm.
 - Also, challenges to this Eurocentric worldview came from all fronts.
- African history had to fight back both against European-centred historical understanding and racist myths pertaining to Africa even harder.
 - Many viewed African history as "parochial": "valuable enough for self knowledge, as an aid to African development, but not as the most significant kind of contribution to the new view of world history" (55). Is *Heritage Studies* kind of like this?
- Much of African history since the 1960s has been about countering "civilization bias", namely that Western Civilization was the only (or best) civilization
 - Some of the "Afrocentric" writings coming from the USA and the diaspora have been about recovering "only those aspects of the African past that resemble the western past" (58). This is sort of a *me too* game.

Curtin: "Recent Trends in African Historiography"

- How was both the racism in historical thought, and the poor response to it rectified? Well first, the value judgements were simply reversed.
 - "Explorers, colonial governors and military officers became cruel exploiters, not heroes in the march to civilization. The Africans became innocent victims, but they were still kept in passive roles" (59). Agency was not often offered to African subjects.
- Decolonizing history comes in many stages, the reversal of values is one aspect. Nationalist history is another.
 - Here, resistance and protest is emphasized and valued, offering a certain level of African agency, but it is often only in the collective. Furthermore, these are very politicized texts, and often elitist.
- In some ways, the challenges of trying to create both an Anti-Eurocentric *and* Anti-Elitist history deals with the fact that it was Europeans who created the archives.
 - Some of the responses to this was to develop oral history theories and practices (to be explored later on).

Curtin: "Recent Trends in African Historiography"

- These new developments in African history in the 1960s, which took seriously African cultures, rejecting the Hamitic Myth (note: Great Zimbabwe), began to influence the way that other disciplines reacted to Africa.
 - Social Sciences began to challenge the Modernization theories, specifically "before" and "after" models.
 - Economies in Africa were actually changing quite rapidly before Europeans arrived.
- Throughout Africa at large, and in some regions more than others (South Africa), African history is a parochial subject (i.e. immensely local).
 - There are a number of reasons for this.
 - There is a neglect to involve African perspectives in global historical writing (I.E. Africans and Africanists are not being brought to the table).
 - Alternatively, many Africanists are frustrated with having to constantly correct the Euro-thinking of their colleagues, leading them to form cliques. (they don't want to come to the table).
 - Finally, many studies are simply trying to recreate the past and re-invent the wheel.

Feierman: "Africa in History"

- Feierman begins by exploring the growth of African history in the USA.
 - In 1958-59, there were 1,735 PhD students in History, only one was an Africanist.
 - This obviously expanded rapidly with African independence.
- Feierman doesn't just believe that historians were getting Africa wrong, but they were also getting history wrong.
- Up until the 1960s, there was "civilizational" thinking and "diffusionist" thinking in historical scholarship. Culture, economies, etc., emanated from one place (Europe), from the centre to the periphery.
 - This fed into the Hamitic myth, viewing African Civilizations as borrowings, influenced by outside sources.
 - This of course is not true. There are countless examples of locally rooted African (and non-African) civilizations, independent of Europe or other forces.
- Many individuals who were considered prominent scholars held this view: McNeill, Braudel, Hegel, etc. (note Braudel).

Feierman: "Africa in History"

- These "diffusionist" or "Civilizational" scholars view Africa as passive and static, only a recipient of culture, economic development, or civilization.
- This is a flaw not just in how scholars (up until recently) have dealt with the history of Africa, but how they dealt with history in general.
 - Civilizational thinking is fundamentally flawed, as it holds problematic notions of self and other
- Close examination with African histories and cultural forms reveals that many of the concepts which Europeans used were simply not applicable in Africa. This wasn't just because Africa was "the exception", but because research terms and cultural forms are inherently specific.
 - It is very difficult to write a global history while taking seriously local histories (note: Eric Wolf)
- Feierman: "The search for African Narratives reveals that they are multiple narratives" (59).

Reid: "Past and Presentism"

- Richard Reid, a historian of Precolonial Uganda and the Horn of Africa, complains that so much of historical writing on and of the African continent deals with the years since the colonial occupation.
 - "African history has been foreshortened to the point where 'presentism' – the compression of supposedly 'relevant' events and processes into a few decades since the beginning of the twentieth century – drives much scholarly output, whether consciously or otherwise" (136).
- He notes some of the reasons for this:
 - Distrust in Oral History methodologies (that they mislead memory, and are elitist)
 - Problems with conducting fieldwork in destabilized nations since the 1970s.
 - Easier access to written sources in the metropolises (Europe).
 - "The era of post-imperial self-reflection" (153). - "Mau-Mau Syndrome"
- Nevertheless, there are a lot of positive developments coming in Pre-colonial history, especially in the fields of Oral History, Historical Linguistics, and innovative use of written sources (local, Missionary, Traveller, etc.)