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History as a Living Reality – The Ibadan School and Historiographical Continuity as a Decolonisation of Africa's Past

Silvia Cristofori

On 13 November 1957 in Onitsha, at the centenary of the foundation of the Niger Mission, Nigerian historian Kenneth Onwuka Dike was invited by the Church Missionary Society to read a paper. Its opening lines sounded like a personal and generational act of recognition of the work of the Anglican missionaries:

«[...] I am myself from start to finish a product of missionary education. [...] I have no doubt that the history of my education is very much the history of the education of most Nigerians of my generation; today the great majority of our leaders in public life, in politics, in education and the church, in commerce and industry, owe their education in whole and in part to missionary enterprise.»¹

He credited the mission with having formed the nationalist elite that would shortly lead an independent Nigeria. However, this was no ordinary commemorative speech, for it laid out a narrative of the past that had not yet been historically legitimated. This was an early blueprint that would initiate the systematic demolition of the historiographical myth in which European missionaries were depicted as the architects of what another Nigerian historian, Jacob Festus Ade Ajayi, described as Nigeria's Christian revolution.² In his talk, Dike described how «the Niger Mission began, in 1857, as a predominantly African enterprise.»³ The figure of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who in 1864 became the first African consecrated bishop of the Anglican Church, played a particularly prominent role in Dike's talk. Although Dike claimed to be the product of the mission both as an intellec-

¹ Kenneth O. Dike, *Origins of the Niger Mission, 1841–1891, a Paper Read at the Centenary of the Mission at Christ Church, Onitsha, on 13 November 1957*, Ibadan 1962, 3.

² Jacob F. A. Ajayi, *Nineteenth Century Origins of Nigerian Nationalism*, in: *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 2/2 (1961), 196–210.

³ Dike, *Origins of the Niger Mission, 1841–1891* (see note 1), 10.

tual and a historian, his implicit conclusion was that the mission had to be connected to an African history. Even though such a history was yet to be written down, Nigerian Christians of all confessions remembered that the first phase of their revolution in the mid-19th century had been characterised by Crowther, the African bishop of Western Equatorial Africa beyond the Queen's Dominions. In fact it was known as Crowther's age, due to the expectations for the future and the individual and collective aspirations he had inspired in educated Christians. The same could be said of the humiliating end to his episcopate in 1890, when he was forced to resign as a result of the disrepute heaped on him by British missionaries who were increasingly absorbing the racial ideologies dominant in Europe at the time. In that humiliation the Christian elite saw a reflection and intensification of their own increasing disillusionment as a result of the unprecedented competition they faced from European staff in the colonial administration in Lagos, in the private sector, and in the missions, manifested in structural forms of racism and segregation. This disillusionment with European civilisation transformed educated Christians from black Victorians into nationalists, even before the scramble for Africa expanded the British dominion from the colony of Lagos to the entire territory of present day Nigeria.

Eight years after the Ontisha speech, Ajayi published *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891: The Making of a New Élite*⁴, a book that explored the theme of the formation of the Christian elite in Nigeria in the same timespan covered by Dike in the 1957 speech. Terence Ranger described this book as «one of the few true classics of African historiography.»⁵ With it the dates 1841 to 1891⁶ became definitively periodised as Crowther's Age. The elite whose formation Ajayi described belonged to an epoch altogether different from that of the nationalists mentioned by Dike in the opening of his speech. But the closing lines of Ajayi's text connected past and new generations for the purposes of his present. From his history of the church emerged

«[...] a significance that should be noted in conclusion. It provides a link between the educated Africans of Crowther's age and the nationalists of our day who have re-emphasized the mid-nineteenth-century doctrines about the importance of an African middle class for the development of the country, and the distinction between the expansion of trade controlled by foreign European firms and economic development as a factor of social and economic change in the country.»⁷

⁴ Jacob F. A. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891. The Making of a New Élite*, London 1965.

⁵ Terence Ranger, New Approaches to the History of Mission Christianity, in: Toyin Falola (ed.), *African Historiography. Essays in Honour Jacob Ade Ajayi*, Harlow 1993, 180.

⁶ Crowther's death in 1891 ends this periodisation, whose beginning was identified in the first expedition of both a commercial and missionary nature along the Niger.

⁷ Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891* (see note 4), 273.

In these words, a key feature emerged which represented the ethos of an entire generation of Africanist historians (both African and non-African): a commitment to an understanding of the past that was indistinguishable from a commitment to Africa's self-government and the questions that it posed. Dike identified the conditions of possibility of Africa's independence in a deep-rooted African historical knowledge: «our past is very much part of our present.»⁸ In 1976 Ranger recalled the commitment of nationalist historians such as the Ibadan scholars to searching for «a usable African past»⁹, which took on a new form in the face of the crisis that, on the one hand, called the previous work of the Africanists into question, but, on the other, pushed them to find answers to the (also historical) causes of poverty in Africa. Although that crisis marked the decline of nationalist historiography, looking back, Ranger could show how the movement towards independence motivated a new historical understanding of Africa, initiating a historiographical golden age of research that lasted almost twenty years.¹⁰

For this to take root there was a need for academic institutions to be set up in the continent. Indeed, the academic historiographical tradition in Nigeria began when, under the pressure of the nationalist movement, a University of London college was established in Ibadan in 1948, becoming a fully autonomous university in 1962. Yet, in the decade leading up to the country's independence, the Ibadan-based scholars had already laid the groundwork for a historiography in and on Nigeria, which would gain significant international recognition in the years to come. Furthermore, what would soon be known as the Ibadan school was not confined to the university of the capital of the western region. Rather it served as the epicentre of the nationalist historiography, as new humanities departments were founded across the country with sites of the Ibadan school being established in the south-western and mid-western universities (Lagos, Ife, and Benin) but also in the central-northern and northern (Ilorin, Jos, and Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria) and eastern universities (Nsukka, Port Harcourt, Calabar).¹¹ Originating in 1955 in the vibrant context of Ibadan, the *Historical Society of Nigeria* (HSN) was especially instrumental in structuring and strengthening this academic field via its annual conferences and its journal (*Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria – JHSN*), whose first issue appeared in December 1956.

⁸ Kenneth O. Dike, African History and Self-Government, in: *West Africa*, 37/28 (1953), 251.

⁹ Terence Ranger, Towards A Usable African Past, in: Christopher Fyfe (ed.), *African Studies Since 1945*, Harlow 1976, 17–30.

¹⁰ Ranger, Towards A Usable African Past (see note 9).

¹¹ For a detailed reconstruction of the history of the Ibadan school, see Toyin Falola/Aderinto Saheed, *Nigeria, Nationalism and Writing History*, Rochester 2010.

Amongst the critiques levelled at the school was the fact that it remained largely within the framework of a political history, mainly focused on (traditional and modern) elites.¹² It was also largely a history of men written by men.¹³

The final lines of Ajayi's monograph quoted above can easily be read as legitimising the bourgeoisie and the modernising role that educated Christian elite had adopted in competition with European colonisers and missionaries, strengthening their position through an ideology that was first civilising and then developmentalist. However, although it was not a subaltern history, in the years in which Ajayi was doing his doctoral studies that led to his monograph¹⁴ there was a radicalism in the production of the Ibadan school that lay not so much in its contestation of a historiographical canon as in the construction of an African one.¹⁵

However, this canon could not be built without counteracting the colonial spell that had portrayed the sub-Saharan continent as at the fringes of history until the arrival of the Europeans on its soil. Exclusion from history, in the Hegelian terms in which it had been articulated, was a dehumanising condemnation that was not yet over. In a 1968 essay, Ajayi wrote that not only missionary history but the entire history of Africa had been influenced by the legends of the colonial situation, which he defined as a mythology in which Europeans had to deal with the natives like Prospero with Caliban.¹⁶

Thus, the issue was not that Africa was left out of the history books, but that it was included in a European historiography that, in the climate of independence, had revealed its nature as a dispositif of domination. References to sources and precise chronologies in European historiography had paradoxically produced a mythisation that deprived Africans of any agency in determining their own history.

¹² Both in terms of the Ibadan school's critical outcomes and legacy, see Falola (ed.), *African Historiography* (see note 5).

¹³ See: Bolanle Awe, Writing Women into History. The Nigerian Experience, in: Karen Offen/Ruth R. Pierson/Jane Rendall (eds.), *Writing Women's History*, London 1991, 211–220; Falola/Saheed, Women's History and the Reconfiguration of Gender, in: Falola, Saheed, Nigeria, Nationalism and Writing History (see note 11), 82; Falola/Saheed, Bolanle Awe: Yoruba and Gender Studies, in: Falola/Saheed, Nigeria, Nationalism and Writing History (see note 11), 143–156.

¹⁴ Ajayi did his PhD in 1958 at the University of London.

¹⁵ Paul E. Lovejoy pointed out that at this time in the historiographical field «elsewhere the revisionists reacted against the mainstream; in Africa, and especially at Ibadan, the reaction was against the absence of a mainstream» (Paul E. Lovejoy, The Ibadan School of Historiography and its Critics, in: Falola (ed.), *African Historiography* (see note 5), 196).

¹⁶ Jacob F. A. Ajayi, The Continuity of African Institutions Under Colonialism, in: Terence Ranger (ed.), *Emerging Themes of African History*, Nairobi 1968, 189.

Whereas in the 1980s the memory of the Shoah stimulated historiographical reflections that revealed the profound difference between history and memory¹⁷, the Ibadan school had shown that, like memory, history could produce myths, deformations, and concealments that silenced alternative narratives of the past. In order to write a history of Africa that did not simply add a new chapter to the history of European imperialism, the first generation of Africanist historians did not primarily resort to fragmented sources of unwritten memory but to elaborations of the past found in African oral traditions. And rather than abandoning the colonial and missionary archives, they subjected them to a detailed scrutiny whose originality lay in unveiling traces of the role played by Africans in constructing their own history.¹⁸ Alongside this rereading of the written documentation, before the methodological legitimization of Jan Vansina¹⁹, the Ibadan historians began wide-ranging group research on the different Nigerian oral traditions.²⁰ They had a dual aim: on the one hand, to collect evidence of the pre-colonial past, traces of which could only be glimpsed in the archives; and, on the other, to allow the historical consciousness that was denied to Africa by the myths of colonial history to enter into academic historiography. This historical consciousness not only preceded contact with Europeans, but continued uninterrupted despite the impact of colonialism. The Christian revolution, which Dike and Ajayi saw themselves as products of, was also to be understood as being fully within a long-term historical continuity and continuity in historical consciousness that would thus have to be written.

A Traditional Historiography

«Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike, Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts, Doctor of Philosophy, Honorary Doctor of Laws, Honorary Doctor of Science, Honorary Doctor of Letters: Your students and disciples, your comrades and colleagues, of the most honourable profession of history have come to salute you. Father of

¹⁷ Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor. Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, University of Washington Press, Seattle/London 1982; Pierre Nora, *Entre histoire et mémoire*, in: Pierre Nora (ed.), *Le lieux de mémoire I, La République*, Paris 1984, I–XLII, cf. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Identity History is not Enough*, in: Eric J. Hobsbawm, *On History*, London 1997, 266–277.

¹⁸ In this regard, Dike showed foresight in his concerted effort to found the national archives of Nigeria. See Kenneth O. Dike, *Report on the Preservation of Public Records in Nigeria*, Ibadan 1954; Kenneth O. Dike, *The Scientific Study of Africa's History*, in: *Negro History Bulletin*, 31/3 (1968), 5–10; cf. Falola/Saheed, K. O. Dike and the National Archives of Nigeria, in: Falola/Saheed, *Nigeria, Nationalism and Writing History* (see note 11), 27–36.

¹⁹ Jan Vansina, *De la tradition orale. Essai de méthode historique*, Tervuren 1961.

²⁰ The first projects in this regard concerned Yoruba and Benin history. See Saburi O. Biobaku, *The Yoruba Historical Research Scheme*, in: *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 1/1 (1956), 59–60; Henry F. C. Smith, *The Benin Study*, in: *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 1/1 (1956), 60–61.

modern African historiography [...].»²¹ Dike was addressed in this way at his graveside in the funeral oration delivered on behalf of the *Historical Society of Nigeria* on 19 November 1983. His academic titles were recited like the laudatory epithets of the praise-poems from the African oral traditions that he had helped to become fully recognised as sources of historical research. Since then, every biographical description of him has remembered him as an innovator.²² Thirty years later, the Nigerian historian Gloria Chuku still referred to him as the founding father of modern African historiography, «a man of foresight and ‹many firsts› [...], an institution-builder».²³

This unanimous and enduring appraisal of Dike depicts a cultural hero who initiated an intellectual revolution during the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial phase. However, his funeral oration also remembered him as a child sitting at the feet of his grandfather's peers:

«in your early days, your insightful grandfather, Dike Nwanchoo, [...] perhaps without knowing it, proceeded to prepare you for your life's mission by making you the regular bearer of his title-stool when going to meetings, and giving you the enviable opportunity of looking and listening and learning when sitting at the feet of the elders.»²⁴

Born in 1917 in Awka in the Igbo region of Eastern Nigeria and orphaned at a young age, Kenneth Dike had soon been entrusted to the care of his paternal grandfather, Dike Nwanchoo, a wealthy merchant whose extensive business network included European traders. As was common in the trajectories of successful Igbo men of that generation, Dike Nwanchoo's wealth translated into political power. By the late 19th century, he had become one of the leaders of the Igbo establishment and, subsequently, a warrant chief in the period of indirect British rule. Other biographical mentions of Kenneth Dike's childhood describe him learning the traditions of the itinerant Akwa blacksmiths²⁵ or gaining historical

²¹ Chieka Ifemesia, Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike, 1917–1983: A Funeral Oration (Delivered at the Graveside on Behalf of the Historical Society of Nigeria, on Saturday, 19 November 1983, in: *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 12/3–4 (1984), 5.

²² See: Jacob F. A. Ajayi, «Towards a more Enduring Sense of History: A Tribute to K. O. Dike», Former President, Historical Society of Nigeria on Behalf of the Historical Society of Nigeria, in: *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 12 3/4 (1984), 1–3; Alexander Animalu, *Life and Thoughts of Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike*, Nsukka (Nigeria) 1997; Gloria Chuku, Kenneth Dike: The Father of Modern African Historiography, in: Gloria Chuku (ed.), *The Igbo Intellectual Tradition. Creative Conflict in Africa and African Diasporic Thought*, New York 2013, 137–164; John Fage, Obituary: Kenneth Onwuka Dike, 1917–83, in: *Africa*, 54/2 (1984), 96–98; Ebere Nwaubani, Kenneth O. Dike, Trade and Politics, and the Restoration of the African in History, in: *History in Africa*, 27 (2000), 229–48.

²³ Chuku, Kenneth Dike (see note 22), 137.

²⁴ Ifemesia, Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike (see note 22), 6.

²⁵ Ajayi, Towards a more Enduring Sense of History (see note 22), 1.

knowledge while travelling between Awka and Onitsha as the apprentice of an itinerant healer.²⁶

Thus, from an early age the founding father of modern African historiography seemed to have developed a deeply intimate connection with the sense of history of the subjects he would later write about. His doctoral thesis at the history department of King's College London²⁷, which he then incorporated in 1956 into *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885*²⁸, traced the profound political and economic changes affecting the trading towns of the Delta during the nineteenth century, in a process that led to the gradual shift from political control by local governments towards British consular rule (1849–1885) and then to indirect colonial administration. Dike pointed out that although the modern history of Western Africa was in large part a story of five centuries of commerce with Europeans, the concentration of scholars on «external factors», such as the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, the British Navy, European explorers, and the foreign and colonial secretaries, «[had] tended to submerge the history of the indigenous peoples and to bestow undue prominence on the activities of the invaders.»²⁹ By contrast, his research was only interested in the «British end» to the extent to which it helped «to understand events in Africa.»³⁰ He thus chose the unprecedented path of a fertile confrontation between written and oral sources, between searching in the metropolitan archives (mainly the Colonial Office and the Foreign Office) and in local archives (both private and colonial), which included the analysis of artefacts (for instance, the bronzes of the Benin kingdom) and historical ruins and relics (canoes, guns, and trade routes in the Delta region).

By centring the narrative on African contexts and dynamics, the Ibadan scholars engaged in a Copernican revolution. They were putting African actors and the sources that they had used to make their history at centre stage. In an encyclopaedia entry co-authored by Dike and Ajayi, this type of oral source was significantly referred to as «traditional African historiography»³¹, an expression that appeared to highlight the strong continuity between crafting history in the pre-colonial past and scholarly writing about that past. To use the words of Saburi Biobaku, another

²⁶ Chuku, Kenneth Dike (see note 22), 137–138.

²⁷ The research that feeds into Dike's doctorate thesis were first followed by V. T. Harlow and then by Gerald Graham, leading figures in British imperial history (Fage, Obituary (see note 22), 96). According to Ajayi, Dike had problems being approved by the University Committee and in finding a supervisor who was willing to support him in a work that gave ample space to oral sources (Ajayi, Towards a more Enduring Sense of History (see note 22), 2).

²⁸ Kenneth O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830–1885. An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria*, Oxford 1956.

²⁹ Dike, *Trade and Politics* (see note 28), 4.

³⁰ Dike, *Trade and Politics* (see note 28), V.

³¹ Kenneth O. Dike/Jacob F. A. Ajayi, African Historiography, in: David L. Sills (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Vols. 5–6, New York 1968, 395.

Ibadan School pioneer, they were well aware that it was their task as «historian[s] of non-literate people» to «fashion *evidence* from traditional sources»³² by submitting oral material to the scrutiny of historical criticism. In keeping with the contemporary nationalist climate, Africanist historians tied together the pre-colonial past and the nascent independent African nations. There also arose the need to establish a long-term historiographical continuity, raising issues that went beyond the methodological discourse.

Already in 1953, Dike clearly outlined the political stakes of making a history of Africa through decolonising its past, in his article, *African History and Self-Government*³³, vigorously contesting the reservations expressed by the British historian Margery Perham on the subject of the imminent independence of the Gold Coast.³⁴ Otherwise an influential advocate of the decolonisation cause, Perham's pessimistic forecasts extended more broadly to «the possibility that African self-government [would] spread surely and smoothly.»³⁵ She thus recommended that «for the next half-century or so, the relationship between the West and Negro Africa must be assimilative in the broadest sense.»³⁶ Africa was, she argued, «the largest area of primitive poverty enduring into the modern era.»³⁷ In a reasoning fusing together racial and cultural arguments, Africa's «primitive poverty» was not intended by Perham only in a material or technological sense: «mentally as well as physically», she argued, «the Africans were helpless before [the] European intrusion [...].»³⁸ In a passage that would not have gone unnoticed by Dike, the British historian lamented that Africa, among other pre-colonial deficiencies, had been «without writing and so without history»³⁹ until European domination.

In his rebuttal of Perham, which would launch him as an emerging nationalist scholar, Dike exposed the legitimising function that historiography had had for imperialism, and instead emphasised that Africa's past had «validity for the present day African.»⁴⁰ The heart of his argument in favour of self-government included various declinations of history: history as an inheritance in which instinctive confidence is culturally acquired: «if the instinctive belief of the African in his traditions is justified, the ultimate emergence of Western African states as independent modern nations cannot be doubted»⁴¹, history as scholarly research:

³² Saburi O. Biobaku, The Problem of Traditional History with Special Reference to Yoruba Tradition, in: *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 1/1 (1956), 45.

³³ Dike, *African History and Self-Government* (cf. note 8).

³⁴ Margery Perham, The British Problem in Africa, in: *Foreign Affairs*, 29/4 (1951), 637–650.

³⁵ Perham, The British Problem in Africa (see note 34), 637.

³⁶ Perham, The British Problem in Africa (see note 34), 638.

³⁷ Perham, The British Problem in Africa (see note 34), 638.

³⁸ Perham, The British Problem in Africa (see note 34), 638.

³⁹ Perham, The British Problem in Africa (see note 34), 638.

⁴⁰ Dike, *African History and Self-Government* (see note 8), 251.

⁴¹ Dike, *African History and Self-Government* (see note 8), 177.

«the African must not only instinctively have faith in his own inheritance, but must also satisfy himself by scientific inquiry that it exists [...] So, the first and urgent need is research, not unwarranted claims for the African past often based on slander evidence»⁴², and an idealised and popularised history for present purposes «great and far-reaching movements have begun with a romantic appeal to the past, back to their ancestors, their culture, for guidance and inspiration.»⁴³

Binding history to self-government was a reaction to the colonial negation of Africa's historicity. However, this was not a form of intellectual extraversion attempting to find external legitimisation within the Western paradigms of national history or to follow the path of European nationalist movements. As the account of Dike as the bearer of his grandfather's title-stool implies⁴⁴, for his generation it was quite common to have acquired «faith in [their] inheritance»⁴⁵ through their early acculturation and socialisation. But while tradition was internalised as an «instinctive belief»⁴⁶, their primary task as modern Africanist historians had to be to extract evidence from oral sources. In so doing, they could not ignore the meaning that history held in the lives of the subjects who had kept the past alive through traditional accounts. The severe scrutiny of historical criticism had to consider the potential distortion of past events that was inherent in making and transmitting tradition.

In a pioneering methodological article, Biobaku referred to oral tradition as «essentially *remembered* [emphasis in original] history»⁴⁷, which implied that it was recitative, performed, re-enacted, and embodied through a constantly trained and retentive memory. Even when entrusted to the mnemotechnics of professional court historians, such as the Arokin and the Onirara who knew the Yoruba praise-poems and dynastic lists, the preservation of past events was the object of a collective endeavour: «the technique of African traditional history is constantly to keep alive the memory of the past; to preserve the past consciously in the present. It is a truism to say that all peoples *live* [emphasis in original] their history but those who do not write it down live it more consciously than those who do.»⁴⁸

Even though they referred to oral tradition as historiography, Ibadan scholars were well aware that it «did not attempt a historical explanation in the modern

⁴² Dike, African History and Self-Government (see note 8), 177.

⁴³ Dike, African History and Self-Government (see note 8), 251.

⁴⁴ For the Igbo, owning a finely carved stool meant having acquired the titles and rank to sit higher than the rest of the assembly.

⁴⁵ Dike, African History and Self-Government (see note 8), 177.

⁴⁶ Dike, African History and Self-Government (see note 8), 177.

⁴⁷ Biobaku, The Problem of Traditional History with Special Reference to Yoruba Tradition (see note 32), 43.

⁴⁸ Biobaku, The Problem of Traditional History with Special Reference to Yoruba Tradition (see note 32), 43.

European sense of verifiable texts and chronologies.»⁴⁹ They observed how history was not only in large part «merged with myth»⁵⁰ but also susceptible, in any crisis or change, to reformulating origin myths in order to validate a new social and political order. In this sense, Ibadan historians understood the traditional approach to history as essentially «functional»⁵¹, without reducing it to a mere presentist fabrication of the past.

The acute consciousness of history was created by a constant process of transmitting the past that tended to overlap with the process of making history. Paradoxically, from that resulted not only the instability of oral sources but also a profound sense of continuity between past and present. The Ibadan scholars found in this continuity a philosophy of history to draw inspiration from for their nationalist ideas: «a belief in the continuity of life [...] and a community of interest between the living, the dead, and the generations yet unborn.»⁵²

A Visionary Historiography

There is an apparent contradiction in the three-act structure (traditional or pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial) of African history and historiography found in the texts analysed here. For the principal focus of the Ibadan school on the continuity of African history appears to be countered by their adoption of a periodisation punctuated by the presence (or absence) of Europeans. However, the school's shift in perspective put African historical dynamics at the centre of historical research. Even when these dynamics had unravelled in reaction to external forces, their focus was on the African initiatives that had contributed to those changes. For example, in a 1969 essay, Ajayi and Emmanuel Ayankanmi Ayandele argued that a historiography of the African church was only possible if it was situated within a long-term African history and thus understood as a «formative social force»⁵³ that, as such, had not developed in a vacuum but was on the contrary «the product of an organic growth on the African soil.»⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Dike/Ajayi, African Historiography (see note 31).

⁵⁰ Dike/Ajayi, African Historiography (see note 31).

⁵¹ Ajayi, Historical Education in Nigeria, in: *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 8/1 (1975), 4; cf. Jacob F. A. Ajayi, Recent Studies in West Africa Diplomatic History, in: *Bulletin of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs*, 1/5 (1975), 39–46.

⁵² Dike/Ajayi, African Historiography (see note 31), 394.

⁵³ Jacob F. A. Ajayi/Emmanuel A. Ayandele, Writing African Church History, in: Peter Bey-erhaus/Carl F. Hallencreutz (eds.), *The Church Crossing Frontiers*, Göttingen/Lund 1969, 94.

⁵⁴ Ajayi/Ayandele, Writing African Church History (see note 53), 90.

In his 1966 book, *Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842–1914*, Ayandele stated that his wide-reaching analysis of the archive followed a clear criterion: «Mission policies and opinions at the headquarters in Europe and America have no place whatsoever, except when these affected the Nigerian peoples.»⁵⁵ Similarly, in *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891*, Ajayi's decision to analyse the half century preceding the establishment of British rule in Nigeria allowed him to explore a period characterised by an equal confrontation between the missions and the «city-states, kingdoms, towns and villages [that] still retained enough political authority and cultural stability»⁵⁶; a phase in which «a dialogue was still possible between missionaries and the different communities, and there was room for ideas and personalities on both sides.»⁵⁷ Ajayi argued that in these five decades leading up to colonialism, missionary success should be seen not in terms of the conversions that were made but in its creation of a western-educated Christian elite. The final lines of the book point out that he considered this embryonic African middle class to be a decisive actor in the country's development, both in the time at which he was writing as well as in the lead up to colonialism.

Ajayi's and Ayandele's research above all illustrates the relationship of reciprocal construction between the missionary movement and the Christian elite in a process that had begun at the end of the 1830s with those who became known as the Saro returning to the Yoruba territory. The latter had been reduced to slavery during the Yoruba wars at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and were then liberated by the British Navy and moved to Sierra Leone, where many of them converted to Christianity and were given a western education in the Protestant missions, and in particular in the Church Missionary Society. When a spontaneous movement to return to the land of their origins took off at the end of the 1830s, «they dragged the mission after them [...]. They wished to remain Christians [...] but also to have a role and influence within the politics of the wider society.»⁵⁸ And so an initial form of Christian politics began that was not aligned with the directions of the European missionary headquarters, reflecting the Saro's contradictory socio-cultural position. Although their brief experience of slavery had not severed their social ties with their homeland, nor led them to forget their mother tongue, their time in Sierra Leone had partly estranged them from it and convinced them of the need for its radical transformation, imagined in terms of a Christian civilisation that took on the trappings of nation-building. In the decades

⁵⁵ Emmanuel A. Ayandele, *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842–1914. A Political and Social Analysis*, London 1966, xvii.

⁵⁶ Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891* (see note 4), xiii.

⁵⁷ Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891* (see note 4), xiii.

⁵⁸ Jacob F. A. Ajayi, *A New Christian Politics?*, in: Dana Robert (ed.), *Converting Colonialism. Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706–1914*, Grand Rapids (Michigan)/Cambridge 2008, 246.

that followed, the Christian elite – both of Saro extraction and educated by the missionary church following their return – articulated a form of nationalism that was not identified with the defence of existing African political realities, but asserted itself as the consciousness of an African race, putting the Pan-Africanist appropriation of racial ideologies into the West African context.

Although Ajayi and Ayandele both brought to light the formation of a Christian-based nationalism that developed even before the colonial government, they did not have an idealised vision of the Christian elite. On the contrary, they highlighted the latter's ambivalent political leadership, which, where it had succeeded in establishing itself, had in fact become a tool of colonial intrusion. Thus, according to Ayandele, it was made up of visionary nationalists suffering from myopia.⁵⁹ If they could imagine a Nigeria for Nigerians before the partition of Africa, they did so with a «wild, fantastic and blatantly quixotic»⁶⁰ vision that had no foothold in the context in which it was meant to be realised. Despite this, «the missionary movement kept most of them together [...], gave them scope and encouragement.»⁶¹ When increasing colonial expansion frustrated their ambitions for leadership, the church became the terrain on which they would test their management and governance skills. These instances of religious leadership were experienced by Christian elite as an anticipation of political self-government and developed as much in the missionary-derived churches as in the independent churches that began to spread in the 1880s.

Their wild vision of their own historical mission was fuelled by their faith in the redemptive power of Christianity, which covered the whole of human history, including African history. This faith in the historical role of Christianity introduced new significance to the collective meaning of history. Indeed, for Ayandele, the most positive achievement of educated Christians was the historiography they produced. The non-academic historiography written by nationalists from the 1870s onward, motivated by a desire to «chronicle the history and the institutions of their country», had saved «much of the remembered history and oral traditions which might have been lost.»⁶² One particularly notable publication was Rev. Samuel Johnson's monumental *History of the Yorubas*, completed in 1897. Giving a leading role to the Oyo monarchy, it mapped out a common historical trajectory shared by the diverse political entities of the Yoruba area, oriented by a Christian destiny that was yet to be realised.

⁵⁹ Emmanuel A. Ayandele, The Phenomenon of the Visionary Nationalists in Pre-Colonial Nigeria, in: John E. Flint/Glyndwr Williams (ed.), *Perspectives of Empire. Essay presented to Gerald S. Graham*, London 1973, 118.

⁶⁰ Ayandele, The Phenomenon of the Visionary Nationalists in Pre-Colonial Nigeria (see note 59).

⁶¹ Ajayi, Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891 (see note 4), 51.

⁶² Ayandele, The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842–1914 (see note 55), 259–260.

The manuscript Johnson sent of the book to the Church Missionary Society Headquarters was not only not deemed worthy of printing due to its length, but was lost. It was therefore reconstructed based on Johnson's notes and published posthumously in 1921 by the author's brother. According to Ajayi, the story of the manuscript reflected the deteriorating position of the elite in the approaching colonial period and, at the same time, was «a testament of the mission-educated elite's vision of the *«Christian politics»* – of Yorubaland set to become a Christian nation, united under the Oyo monarchy, and modernised by the educated elite under the patronage of a benevolent British protectorate.»⁶³

Connections and Disconnections

With colonial rule looming, Johnson's *History of the Yorubas* had attempted to give a common structure as much to the oral tradition transmitted by the Arokin of the Oyo court as to the remembered history of the more recent past. He had done this by weaving a narrative inspired by the biblical narrative, thus constructing a national history that found fulfilment in the advent of Christianity. As John David Yeadon Peel noted, his *History* was «an attempt to discern the purposes of God operating through the turbulent history of his times» marked by more than a century of Yoruba wars, and «to give a secure place to Christianity in that history.»⁶⁴ It was thus a history of redemption that saw a restoration of the nation in the «enlightenment of the Gospel.»⁶⁵ His history grafted the providential future in which he believed onto the past, identifying a profound continuity where both his *«heathen»* compatriots and the European missionaries saw incompatibility and fractures. In this sense, Johnson had written a history seeking a usable African past for the dilemmas of the present, and, in so doing, had reconfigured the oral tradition of his people within a new, biblically inspired narrative structure. He had thus effected a disconnection of the past from the socio-cultural and political functions of the oral tradition that had configured it, in order to connect it to a universal history of salvation.

The non-academic historiography of the visionary nationalists of which Johnson's work was a shining example was interpreted by Ibadan historians as an early challenge to colonial historiography, able to happen because «the traditional African historical consciousness remained alive.»⁶⁶ This historiographical production, which had the contemporary oral tradition as its primary source, not only

⁶³ Ajayi, A New Christian Politics? (see note 58), 260.

⁶⁴ John D. Y. Peel, Christianity, Islam, and *Oriṣa* Religion, Oakland 2016, 51.

⁶⁵ John D. Y. Peel, Christianity, Islam, and *Oriṣa* Religion (see note 64).

⁶⁶ Dike/Ajayi, African Historiography (see note 31), 397.

refuted the myth of historical consciousness as the exclusive heritage of Europeans, but also provided an eloquent testimony of how the traditional African historical consciousness was not swept aside with the arrival of the colonisers but continued to integrate African innovations into new formulations of origin myths, thus supplying a sense of continuity through the fractures.

However, the elaboration of the past had found a new form of tradition in the writing of history. Just as Johnson had bound Yoruban history to a universal history of salvation, so Ibadan scholars wrote the past by reconnecting it to a universal human history. Their history was not limited to the Igbo, the Yoruba, the Edo or the Hausa, but brought those particular historical experiences and consciousnesses into conversation with other historical experiences, so they could speak to all humanity. Without giving an answer, Biobaku asked: «but will it be history as the people themselves conceive their history to be?»⁶⁷ With traditional historiography disconnected from its functional role, would history still be significant to the people who had transmitted it up until then?

Not long after, postcolonial events would disrupt the lives of some of the Ibadan school's main exponents. In 1965 Biobaku survived an attack by a student who saw the appointment of the Yoruba historian as Vice Chancellor of the University of Lagos as ethnic favouritism. Meanwhile, Dike took the side of the republic of Biafra during the years of the civil war, becoming its roving ambassador. Against those who claimed that «the Biafran movement means the balkanisation of Africa»⁶⁸, he denounced the severe discrimination, even to the point of ongoing extermination, that the southeastern population had suffered at the hands of the Nigerian government.

After his period in exile following the defeat of Biafra, Dike nevertheless saw the 25 years of the *Historical Society of Nigeria* as on the whole positive, noting how the existence of a flourishing Africanist historiography could now be taken for granted. It was still necessary to promote, as a practice of decolonisation, the need «to look inwards and not externally for the explanation of the historical process in Black Africa.»⁶⁹ He noted that until then its oral traditions had mainly been seen to promote stability and continuity in the face of conflict and change. Taking his recent research on the Aro conducted with Felicia Ekejiuba⁷⁰ as an example, he believed that the task was now to highlight the numerous contradictions and conflicting versions within oral traditions:

⁶⁷ Biobaku, The Problem of Traditional History with Special Reference to Yoruba Tradition (see note 32), 46.

⁶⁸ Kenneth O. Dike, Biafra Explains its Case, in: The New York Times, 28 April 1969.

⁶⁹ Kenneth O. Dike, African History Twenty Five Years Ago and Today, in: Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria, 10/3 (1980), 19.

⁷⁰ Kenneth O. Dike/Felicia Ekejiuba, Aro of South-eastern Nigeria, 1650–1980: A Study of Socio-economic Formation and Transformation in Nigeria, Ibadan 1990.

«in this regard, oral traditions can be regarded, in a sense, as an instrument of resistance to the established order, an instrument upon which each successive phase of political and economic conflict are engraved. Hence their conservative nature as well as their potentiality for legitimising change.»⁷¹

According to Dike, these observations were not peculiar only to Aro or African oral societies but could find wider application in the study of human history.

Dike's proposal does not answer Biobaku's question. Writing a history that brings to light conflicting visions in oral traditions is not in itself a «history as the people themselves conceive their history to be.»⁷² However, his proposal presents that question as an unresolved tension bubbling beneath the surface and, in this sense, is representative of one of the most significant legacies of decolonial Africanist historiography more generally: that of having helped to highlight how historical consciousness is constructed in a history-making that is an attempt not only to answer present questions but to imagine alternatives to the status quo.

As the preceding pages have shown, nationalist historiography had seen its commitment to a new understanding of the past as a commitment to Africa's self-government. Two decades after Nigerian independence, Dike continued to call for a historical-critical study of unexplored aspects of the tradition. His firsthand experiences of the structural violence of the postcolonial order did nothing to alter his conviction that Africa's past had «validity for the present day African.»⁷³ Ibadan scholars had pointed to the positive stabilising function of traditional historiography, which incorporated any changes within a continuous narrative rooted in origin myths. This interpretation of the oral tradition now appeared at risk of supporting the idea of «One Nigeria», which was used to legitimise post-war military regimes. Dike's research on the contradictions embedded in oral traditions likely stemmed from his awareness of this risk, with the conflicting versions of the past he identified allowing him to trace a potential continuity of dissent. Although new questions and approaches to African historiography were emerging toward the end of his life, his research at the time seemed to stress the continued relevance of the Ibadan school in its study of how African historical consciousness expressed itself by narrating the past for present purposes. He could be read as implying that whereas in the past investigating expressions of historical consciousness had been used to destroy the colonial narrative, now it could be used to ensure that nationalist historiography did not become an ideological dispositif of postcolonial power.

⁷¹ Dike, African History Twenty Five Years Ago and Today (see note 65), 22.

⁷² Biobaku, The Problem of Traditional History with Special Reference to Yoruba Tradition (see note 32), 46.

⁷³ Dike, African History and Self-Government (see note 8), 251.

History as a Living Reality – The Ibadan School and Historiographical Continuity as a Decolonisation of Africa's Past

This article analyses some of the works of the Ibadan school of historiography with the aim of showing how, in a context of African nationalisms, they intended to give historiographical legitimacy to African historical consciousness. On the one hand, this revealed the extent to which historiography until then had not only written a partial history but was also an ideological dispositif of domination. On the other, it attempted to establish a historiographical continuity with both African oral traditions and with non-academic histories written by the Nigerian Christian elite since the 1870s. This article will highlight how one of the most interesting legacies of the Ibadan school was the unresolved issue that, while the writing of history, both academic and non-academic, connected the African past to a universal history, placing it in conversation with other human experiences, it also disconnected the oral tradition from the sense of history it had expressed in its own context of production.

Africanist Historiography – Ibadan School of Historiography – Decolonisation of History – Nationalism and Historiography – Historiography of the African Christian Elite in the 19th Century – African Oral Traditions and Historiography.

Geschichte als lebendige Realität – Die Ibadan-Schule und historiographische Kontinuität als Dekolonisierung der afrikanischen Vergangenheit

Dieser Artikel analysiert einige Werke der Ibadan-Schule der Geschichtsschreibung mit dem Ziel zu zeigen, wie sie im Kontext afrikanischer Nationalismen dem afrikanischen Geschichtsbewusstsein eine historiographische Legitimation geben wollten. Dabei wurde zum einen deutlich, wie sehr die Geschichtsschreibung bis dahin nicht nur eine partielle Geschichte geschrieben hatte, sondern auch ein ideologisches Herrschaftsdispositiv war. Andererseits wurde versucht, eine historiografische Kontinuität sowohl mit den mündlichen Traditionen Afrikas als auch mit den von der christlichen nigerianischen Elite seit den 1870er Jahren verfassten nicht-akademischen Geschichtsbüchern herzustellen. Dieser Artikel wird aufzeigen, wie eines der interessantesten Vermächtnisse der Ibadan-Schule das ungelöste Problem war, dass die akademische und nicht-akademische Geschichtsschreibung zwar die afrikanische Vergangenheit mit einer universellen Geschichte verband und sie in ein Gespräch mit anderen menschlichen Erfahrungen brachte, aber auch die mündliche Tradition von dem Geschichtsgefühl trennte, das sie in ihrem eigenen Produktionskontext zum Ausdruck gebracht hatte.

Afrikanistische Geschichtsschreibung – Ibadan-Schule der Geschichtsschreibung – Dekolonisierung der Geschichte – Nationalismus und Geschichtsschreibung – Geschichtsschreibung der afrikanischen christlichen Elite im 19. Jahrhundert – afrikanische mündliche Traditionen und Geschichtsschreibung.

L'histoire comme réalité vivante – L'école d'Ibadan et la continuité historiographique comme décolonisation du passé africain

Cet article analyse quelques travaux de l'école historiographique d'Ibadan dans le but de montrer comment, dans un contexte de nationalismes africains, elle entendait donner une légitimité historiographique à la conscience historique africaine. D'une part, elle révèle à quel point l'historiographie, jusqu'alors, n'avait pas seulement écrit une histoire partielle, mais était aussi un dispositif idéologique de domination. D'autre part, elle a tenté d'établir une continuité historiographique avec les traditions orales africaines et les histoires non académiques écrites par l'élite chrétienne nigériane depuis les années 1870. Cet article met en lumière l'un des héritages les plus intéressants de l'école d'Ibadan, à savoir la question non résolue selon laquelle, si l'écriture de l'histoire, qu'elle soit académique ou non, a

permis de relier le passé africain à une histoire universelle et de le mettre en relation avec d'autres expériences humaines, elle a également déconnecté la tradition orale du sens de l'histoire qu'elle avait exprimé dans son propre contexte de production.

Historiographie africaniste – école historiographique d'Ibadan – décolonisation de l'histoire – nationalisme et historiographie – l'historiographie de l'élite chrétienne africaine au 19^e siècle – traditions orales africaines et historiographie.

La storia come realtà vivente – La scuola di Ibadan e la continuità storiografica africana come decolonizzazione della storia

L'articolo analizza alcuni lavori della scuola di Ibadan con l'obiettivo di ricostruire come, nella tempesta dei nazionalismi africani, essi fossero animati dall'intento di dare legittimazione storiografia alla coscienza storica che era stata negata all'Africa. Tale operazione, da un lato, svelava quanto la storiografia fosse stata prima di allora non solo scrittura di una storia parziale ma anche vero e proprio dispositivo ideologico di dominazione. D'altro, provava a riannodare una continuità storiografica tanto con le tradizioni orali africane quanto con le storie non accademiche scritte dall'élite cristiana nigeriana a partire dagli Settanta del XIX secolo. L'articolo intende mettere in luce come in questo confronto si sia generata una questione irrisolta che costituisce uno dei lasciti più interessanti della scuola di Ibadan: la scrittura della storia, accademica e non accademica, connetteva il passato africano alla storia universale, ponendolo in conversazione con altre esperienze umane, ma disconnetteva anche la tradizione orale dalla coscienza e dal senso della storia che aveva espresso nel proprio contesto di produzione.

Storiografia africanista – scuola storiografica di Ibadan – decolonizzazione della storia – nazionalismo e storiografia – storiografia dell'élite cristiana africana del XIX secolo – tradizioni orali africane e scrittura della storia.

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