

History and Historians in Africa

Question: Is it possible for a muzungu (white man in East Africa) to write a Black African History?

Discussion: Many African black intellectuals would say no, as white people are, due to the colour of their skin, part of the oppressors' class. There are racist problems with this belief such as how colour is defined; the contradictions that occur with black people raised in white cultures and white people raised in black cultures; and the lack of evidence of any relationship between skin colour and behaviour.

It also ignores the fact that some white historians come from places that suffered conquest, colonisation and evangelisation. Their perspectives will often differ and be more understanding compared to historians descended from oppressors. Historians are products of their history.

Q. Is it possible for a black African to write a Black African History?

D. It first needs to be established if such person was ever a member or subject to a pre-European oppressors' clan that assisted with conquest and governance and how this might affect their historical perspectives. Historians are products of their history.

Secondly is such a person currently an oppressor or victim based on gender, class, power, education, skin shade colour, tribe, clan or other criteria where one person deems himself superior to another? If so, can these limiting perspectives and contexts be transcended? If not, then writings will be fundamentally biased and, at worst, public relations. It is the fundamental challenge for any historian who seeks to successfully portray the past.

Q. Is it possible for a black African educated in white academia, its derivatives and philosophical paradigms to write a Black African History?

It is an open question whether it is possible to bridge the vast gap between current academia and pre-colonial Africa, which leads to a much deeper question that transcends the colour issue.

Q. Is it possible for literate historians to even understand, let alone reconstruct, thousands of years of the many primarily oral pre-colonial cultures of Africa?

D. The first step is to reconstruct and understand how literacy changed society and, for an African, how these changes gave rise to historians asking questions. Historians are products of their education.

Literacy has fundamentally changed much of sub-Saharan Africa with the exception of West Africa where Islam has been present since medieval times and the Swahili Coast of East Africa with its long maritime associations to the north and east.

Whatever the motivations of the European conquerors and associated missionaries the long term result has been a fundamental shift in the educational and employment opportunities available due to the advanced knowledge and technologies that are associated with literacy.

However literacy is not neutral; it has been embedded and integrated into European cultures for hundreds of years and increasingly spread to the general population (A Marxist might argue that the spread of literacy is a capitalist plot as literate employees are more profitable assets than illiterates).

This is not yet the case in much of Africa where literacy and education is a thin veneer; where people are still fundamentally guided by (subjective) oral modes with superficial colonial-derived add-ons.

Africa is going through a transition as it adapts and integrates literacy and its associated methods and infrastructures of governance, economy and technology while coping with often chaotic internal and external political power struggles and economic forces.

Identity in Africa is contested. The dilemma is that much of the contest is between blinkered literate academically-trained intellectuals and these shades of opinion are but a small sliver of the ever-changing multiplicity of identities that make up society in the African continent in all its geographical diversity.

Q. Is it possible to write a Black African History?

D. Yes, I like to think so; I would not have published two local history books if I did not think so. It's a challenge but one that any discerning historian willing to understand and transcend assumptions and paradigms, regardless of origin, should be able to surmount by firstly recognising that they are products literacy, education and history in their birth country.

However, the contribution will be limited due to the ephemeral nature of oral knowledge and the almost total dependence on the culturally-biased literature of its first and later recorders. There needs to be combinations of oral and academic historical projects in specific cultural areas to fully grasp all the perspectives – and the sooner the better, as knowledge disappears when its holders die.

Q. How to define Conquest, Colonisation, De-Colonisation and Re-Colonisation?

D. Conquest is defined as one group making another group subjects by becoming their leaders, through invasion and military victories. Colonisation is rarer and mostly happened in continental America and Australia & New Zealand. With the exception of Southern Africa, colonisation to the African continent was sparse with the exception of sporadic plantations.

Africa had the opposite problem: its main 'export' was the enforced colonisation of the American continent by Africans through capture and slavery.

Decolonisation has two meanings: to remove colonists from the lands they usurped or to remove the embedded power structures from the lands they conquered. Having achieved the former during the independence struggles of the 1960s most African countries are concerned now with the latter, depending on their foreign policies and relationships with multinational organisations.

However, it is not possible to recreate the past, only to adapt to the present and plan for the future. The world and its power structures are very different compared with the 1960s, so definitions and strategies of decolonisation must change but as a concept how long can it remain relevant?

Now that African countries are nearly as long independent as they spent as colonies when will they stop discussing decolonisation?

It is time to abandon decolonisation for it is time for Africans to Re-Colonise Africa.