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### Abstract

Basil Davidson's book *Old Africa Rediscovered* (1959) was the first major survey of African history before the arrival of the Europeans. Shortly before her death in 1962 Karen Blixen wrote in her preface to the Danish edition: 'A wonderful book. I have waited for it and longed for it since I first and before the First World War set foot on African soil.' It had strengthened, her conviction that the artist - not the politician, the scientist or the businessman - must be the best intermediary between Africa and Europe,

SVEN POULSEN

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# African History: from a European to an African point of view

Basil Davidson's book *Old Africa Rediscovered* (1959) was the first major survey of African history before the arrival of the Europeans. Shortly before her death in 1962 Karen Blixen wrote in her preface to the Danish edition: 'A wonderful book. I have waited for it and longed for it since I

first and before the First World War set foot on African soil.' It had strengthened her conviction that the artist — not the politician, the scientist or the businessman — must be the best intermediary between Africa and Europe.

As journalist, author and amateur-historian Davidson has been a pioneer in working for a better European understanding of Africa. Professor Roland Oliver, for a long time the leading expert on African history, points out that as a historian 'Davidson commands his sources. If he assesses them too admirably for some tastes he also rights an old imbalance'.<sup>1</sup>

This imbalance was certainly serious. As late as 1963 the British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper went on record as saying: 'Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none; only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness.'<sup>2</sup> Trevor-Roper underestimated a new development, which had begun a few years earlier. But in a way he was right.

About 1960 there existed hundreds of works on African history. With few exceptions they were euro-centric and described mainly what the Europeans did in Africa. In their assessment of African culture they often reflected a European inability to judge any culture except in terms of their own. Technologically backward, without written language and most of them living in societies which seemed to a cursory inspection not to be regulated by law and order, Africans were generally considered as savages.

During most of the five centuries in which Europeans had contact with Africans European misconceptions about Africa were carefully nurtured to further European economic and political interests. First the slave trade, then — from about 1880 — colonial imperialism. The years between was the period of the western travellers through Africa. They were called 'explorers' although they depended wholly on the guidance of Africans or Arabs, followed oft-tramped paths and were helped immensely in their discoveries of waterfalls, rivers and lakes by Africans living many weeks' journey from these places. Confronted with the realities of African societies explorers like Heinrich Barth, Gustav Nachtigall, Livingstone, and even Stanley corrected some misconceptions and described some of the African states and trading centres they encountered as wealthy and well-ordered. The explorers relied wholly on Africans for survival, but they could, as Africans usually could not, place their discoveries in a larger context, thus providing a correct map of Africa.

The explorers' books might well have been an inducement for European historians to try to lift the darkness which shrouded the continent's past. After all, because of improved historical criticism, more attention given to economic causes and the development of a number of auxiliary sciences, European historical research in the nineteenth century took major steps towards a scientific assessment of the past. But in the hectic atmosphere of the European scramble for Africa and colonial imperialism the misconceptions inherited from the period of the slave trade survived easily. Africans were savages and if they were to be studied it must be a task for the anthropologists. This meant that European historians were at least one and perhaps two generations behind the anthropologists in giving serious attention to Africa.

Anthropologists such as C.G. Seligman and Leo Frobenius did a good deal of pioneering work in Africa. There were however a number of things they could not explain without introducing new and misleading myths about the African past. They were apt to attribute the great achievements of Africa to light-skinned outsiders who came down from the north. According to Seligman these 'Hamites' entered Africa in a long succession of waves: '...the incoming Hamites were pastoral »Europeans« ... better armed as well as quicker witted than the dark agricultural negroes.'<sup>3</sup> In the view of the anthropologists the states of West Africa, Uganda and as far south as the Zulus of South Africa were the creation of conquering Hamitic pastoralists. Unable to connect for instance the stone buildings of Zimbabwe and the Benin bronzes with the notion of a primitive Africa, they looked for the influence of outsiders. Frobenius suggested that Benin's art might be descended from the lost continent of Atlantis.

Gradually the Hamitic myth was questioned and broken down. But it was not until the 1960s that the linguist Joseph Greenberg's demolition of Seligman was generally accepted. Greenberg refuted the linguistic analysis on which the grouping of 'Hamitic' languages was based and pointed out the negative correlation between Hamitic languages and pastoralism in West Africa. There is not the slightest evidence that light-skinned Africans are quicker-witted than the darker Africans. The lighter-skinned probably entered East Africa from Ethiopia and spoke languages of the same family as Hebrew and Arab (Afro-Asiatic). Recent studies show that semitic languages have been spoken in Ethiopia for at least four thousand years.

How incomplete and misleading the written history of for instance Ghana was, I experienced ten years ago. Having been commissioned to

write a short story of the Ashatis (or Asante) for use in schools I found I had to piece much of the story together from a number of articles in various periodicals.

Asante in the nineteenth century fought seven wars with the British, who had their headquarters on Cape Coast fort. Consequently Asante and the Gold Coast attracted the attention of British historians at an early stage. Working my way through the main work on the subject, *A History of The Gold Coast and Ashanti* by W.W. Claridge, published 1915, I found that Claridge seemed to know nothing about either the Golden Stool and its symbolic value or about its creator, the priest/-politician Okomfo Anokye. Most of Claridge's work, over 1,000 pages, deals with the British Expansion on the Gold Coast, which took place in the nineteenth century. W.E.F. Ward, who published a book on Gold Coast history in 1948, mainly followed in the footsteps of Claridge. The few new books presenting a less euro-centric point of view dealt with Ghana after about 1885.

Thomas Bowdich, who entered the imposing Asante capital of Kumasi in 1817 as the secretary of a British trading company, wrote a book, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, published 1819 and republished in facsimile with an introduction by Ward in 1966. In his long introduction Ward used all the space to explain why Bowdich, who left Cape Coast with the mission as scientific officer but during its stay in Kumasi took charge of it and secured the recall of his chief, was not justified in doing so. About Bowdich as an author Ward wrote that 'our first impression is that his book is little more than a jumble of superficial information, much of it of little interest to the modern reader'. In fact Bowdich's book is among the most quoted in modern works about pre-colonial Africa. After 58 pages of descriptions of Europeans intriguing against each other in Kumasi, Ward used five lines to recognize that 'Bowdich's quarrel now seems to be of very little importance and that what is valuable to us is Bowdich's vivid description of the Ashanti kingdom at the height of its power'.

In 1966, when Ward, a typical euro-centric specialist in African history, thus admitted that much of what the Europeans did in Africa now seemed of little importance, the Ghanaian historian, Professor A. Boahen criticized the historiography of Ghana. The European historians had treated the development before the arrival of the Europeans about 1500 quite wrongly, the following centuries only form an European point of view, especially the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while the expansion of Asante power in the eighteenth century

to a certain degree had been treated correctly but with many gaps and misunderstandings.<sup>4</sup>

Boahan was one of the new generation of students who since 1945 had eagerly thrown themselves into the work of researching and re-evaluating African History. It was not only African students who found that the African past had been distorted by the Europeans. Many Europeans and Americans shared their views. Moreover the empty spaces of the African past was a challenge to the spirit of inquiry. The background was of course the liquidation of the European colonial empire in Asia, the Pan-African movement, Négritude, the insurrection in Madagascar 1947, the Algerian war of liberation, the Mau-Mau rebellion — in short the wave of African nationalism.

In 1960 — the great year of African independence — the important periodical *The Journal of African History* began to appear. The first number contained an article by the young Belgian historian and anthropologist Jan Vansina, now professor of African History at the University of Wisconsin, 'Recording the oral tradition of Bakuba', an article based on long field studies in what was then the Belgian Congo. He questioned the fundamental concept of historians that written sources are better than oral. On the whole the oral tradition is now considered valuable information for from one to two hundred years back for some — but not all — ethnic groups. In the case of the Bakuba it could be verified about 300 years back, but this is an exception.

The written sources of African history no doubt were scarce but it was found that much valuable information was hidden in administrative and mercantile archives, which had hitherto gone unheeded. The works of early Arab geographers and historians such as Ibn Battuta and Ibn Khaldun were re-examined and found of great value. Linguistics, anthropology, archeology — including the new method of radiocarbon-dating — became indispensable especially in the research of the past of the areas, mainly stateless societies, which had never been visited by European or Arab merchants or travellers in pre-colonial times.

The two first editors of *The Journal of African History*, Roland Oliver, professor of African History at the University of London, and John Fage, the University of Birmingham, in 1962 published *A Short History of Africa* which immediately became a bestseller and has appeared in several new editions since then. However, the new material uncovered soon became so overwhelming that the most important works published since then have been either surveys of the history of regions, African states or ethnic groups. The first volumes of major co-operative surveys of

East Africa were published in 1963, of South Africa 1969 and of West Africa 1971. At present two multi-volume, multi-authored reference works have begun to appear: *The General History of Africa* under the auspices of UNESCO and *The Cambridge History of Africa*.

The transition during the last quarter of a century from an European or colonial to an African point of view is only one of many logical consequences of the fact that Africa was never through the rather brief colonial period in danger of suffering the same fate as other continents. The history of Australia, the USA, Canada, and to a certain extent Latin America is mainly the history of what the white man did. The original populations of these continents were reduced to insignificant minorities. Nowhere in Africa were the Africans outnumbered, nor was their culture destroyed. In 1950 for instance the Europeans in West Africa amounted to one per thousand, in Kenya to one percent of the population.

The African point of view is on the whole simply a more objective attitude to the study of the African past than the short European experience in Africa described by Europeans. Much more attention is given to pre-colonial Africa and the impact of the colonial period is completely re-evaluated. In Nkrumah's words:

Our history needs to be written as the history of our society, not as the story of European adventurers. African society must be treated as enjoying its own integrity; its history must be a mirror of that society, and the European contact must find its place in this history only as an African experience, even a crucial one. That is to say, the European contact needs to be assessed and judged from the point of view of the principles animating African society, and from the point of view of the harmony and progress of this society.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

1. Basil Davidson, *African Kingdoms*. Time-Life Books, 1967, reprinted 1975. Preface by Roland Oliver, p. 7.
2. Quoted in Ali A. Mazrui, *Political Values and the Educated Class in Africa*. Heinemann, London, 1978, p. 94.
3. C.G. Seligman, *Races of Africa*. 4th edition, Oxford University Press, London, 1966, p. 100.
4. A.A. Boahan, *A New Look at the History of Ghana*. African Affairs 260, July 1966.
5. Kwame Nkrumah, *Conscientism*. Revised edition, Monthly Review Press, New York & London, 1970, p. 63.