

**AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY (ABU) A FORCE TO RECKON WITH IN THE
STUDY OF WEST AFRICA HISTORIOGRAPHY**

BY

YUSUF BOLANTA GANI

ABSTRACT

Prior to the coming of the Europeans Africans has a way of preserving their history. All events that took place in their societies were recorded orally. This method is known as oral tradition. It is a way of recording events in the memory which can be transmitted from one person to another through the words of mouth. The emergence of the Europeans in the Africa society came with their Eurocentric view asserted that Africans had no history. Using written sources as a yardstick, some colonial historians had argued that Africa had no history, because, according to them the Africa part was nothing but darkness. Which the African Scholars debunked, especially the A B U School of History. The A.B.U school of history was based on the principle that history involves rigorous evaluation and assessment of all types of sources for historical reconstruction. This approach exposes the bankruptcy of over-reliance on written sources, and encourages the use of oral, archaeologies, linguistics and other sources for historical reconstruction. This paper examines the ways by which this school passed a serious challenge to colonial historiography that tended to distort the significance of other sources and to downgrade African history vis-as-vis European imperialism.

INTRODUCTION

The Ahmadu Bello University School of History clearly connotes a collection of staff and advanced degree graduates of the department of history at the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. The efforts of this particular school were a somewhat direct response to the Eurocentric intellectual racism as well as those who were interested in the African past. The emergence of the ABU School of History can be traced to the establishment of the Ahmadu Bello University in 1962. In that same year, the department of history was established. Abdullahi Smith Served as the first HOD of the department and under him, a succession of history scholars were trained and through their scholarly works the ABU School of History came to be reckoned with in Nigeria. West African and indeed the entire world. In its contribution to the revolution historiographical on Africa and its people.

In this paper, an attempt is made to establish the motivations for the emergence of the ABU School of history after the Ibadan school. The key actors of the school would be examined in a bid to assess their works and their impact on West African historiography

In a bid to fully appreciate the motivations for the emergence of the school of historiography first in the University of Ibadan school and subsequently the ABU school. It important will to look at the views Europeans had about Africa. Imperialism as a historical phenomenon was multifaceted, in addition to its political, economic and military dimensions; it had strong recognizable intellectual ideological roots. The intellectual attraction of colonialism had been nurtured centuries before. This tradition consisted in the denial of the historicity of pre-European Sub-Saharan Africa. The often misconceived view of Africans by Europeans was explicitly explained by Basil Davidson when he wrote:

... They are the journals of men who look at African resolutely from the outside... the quality of their observation was circumscribed within a cramping limit, and they must be read today with this mind. If they tried to understand the minds and actions of the Africans they knew, it was by the way and it was rare. Nearly all of them were convinced that they were faced by “primeval man”, by humanity as it had been before history began, by societies which lingered in the dawn of time. This point of view meshed in step with Europe’s overwhelming expansion of power and wealth, with its political strength and resilience and sophistication.

The representation explained above came about as a consequence of the pseudoscientific racism which gained enormous grounds in the 19th century. It posited that Africans were racially inferior human beings while the Europeans were superior races. It was further contended that Africa had no significant history worth studying. What therefore passed for African history was an elaborate network of superficial truths and deep-seated prejudices mixed in such proportions as would legitimize European occupation.

THE IBADAN SCHOOL OF HISTORY

The Ibadan school of history was the first to be established and for many years the dominant school in the study of Nigerian history. Its origins are at the University of Ibadan in Ibadan Nigeria in the 1950s, and it remained dominant right through to the 1970s. The university of Ibadan was the first university established in Nigeria and its scholars helped in the setting up of history department of most of Nigeria’s other universities therefore spreading the Ibadan historiography. Its scholars also wrote the history textbooks that were used at all levels of the Nigerian education system for many years. The school’s output is often considered to be most clearly embodied in the “Ibadan History Series”.

Kenneth Onwuka Dike (1917-1983) is often referred to as the first modern scholarly proponent of Africanist history. He was appointed as the head of department of history as the first African professor of history. His publications were a watershed in African historiography. With a PhD from London in 1940, Dike became the first African to complete western historical training. He helped found the Historical Society of Nigeria and the National Archives.

The department and its various units thesis *trade and politics in the Niger Delta 1830-1885* dealt with 19th century economics and politics in the Niger Delta: Dike helped create the Ibadan School of history and promoted the use of oral evidence by African historians.

Other leading scholars of the Ibadan school include Saburi Biobaku, J.F.A. Ajayi, Adiele Afigbo, E.A Ayandele, Obaro Ikime and Tekena Tamuno. A number of foreign scholars many of which came to teach in Nigeria are also often associated with the school, these include, Micheal Crowther, H.F.C later Abdullahi Smith, J.B Webster, R.J. Gavin, Robert Smith, and John D. Omer-Cooper.

The school was characterized by its overt Nigerian nationalism and it was geared towards forging Nigerian identity through publicizing the glories of precolonial society. The school made use of oral traditions in reconstructing history and took a strongly interdisciplinary approach to

gathering information. The African scholars of the Ibadan School saw British and American universities as bastions of imperialism and therefore shunned the western based journal of African History in favour of the domestic Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria.

The Ibadan school however began to decline in importance in the 1970s. The Nigerian civil war for instance led many of its proponents to question whether Nigeria was in fact a unified nation with a national history.⁹

The Ibadan school was also accused of lacking an all embracing philosophy in its works, research and syllabus, as such calling it a school was a misnomer. Proponents of this argument point to the Dar-es-Salam school with its quasi-Marxist orientation.

There was also the criticism of the Ibadan School focusing its attention exclusively on aristocratic history at the expense of the poor in the society. By this the historians were accused of representing the ruling class of the past neglecting the poor, powerless and exploited class.

ABU SCHOOL OF WEST AFRICAN HISTORY

After independence universities began to spring up, the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria was established in September, 1962. Its History department was established in the same year and headed by Professor Henry Frederick Charles later Abdullahi Smith. The department from inception aimed at challenging the imperial denial of the existence of African history by unearthing and reconstructing varied aspects of such a history. Professor Abdullahi Smith and other scholars provided an alternative vision that led to the emergence of what has been called the Islamic Legitimist School and a vibrant Marxist tradition. The ABU School laid emphasis on Marxism and attempted a reinterpretation of and class analysis of contemporary Nigeria. Focus was placed on the study of the Sokoto caliphate with scholars calling on the Nigeria nation to draw models and ideals from it to improve the society instead of looking to the west. The Marxists therefore turned to African societies for ideas and used materialist explanations to seek an end to the western domination of Africa. Its key historiographical preoccupation therefore included the identification of topics and themes, considered appropriate towards demonstrating not only the existence but also the richness, variety, antiquity and relevance of African history.

The reconstruction and interpretation of the historical achievements of Africans in the past were appropriately supplemented with efforts aimed at indicating the relevance of such experiences to the new task of nation building for the newly emerging African nations. Institutions that could aid in the recovery, documentation and analysis of historical source materials were therefore established. A centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies (CNCS) was established in Zaria as well as the Northern History Research Scheme (NHRS). The latter developed into a major archive for the recovery, documentation and translation of Arabic manuscripts which cover various fields including general works on Islam, its expansion in the different regions of Nigeria, the biographies of some Islamic personalities, in particular the Fodiawa (disciples and descendants of Uthman Dan Fodio). Furthermore, the residence of the late premier of Northern Nigeria in Kaduna became *Arewa* house and functioned as a major northern history project housing a major library, an archive and museum facilities relevant for postgraduate training programmes and historical research. The decline of the Ibadan school saw the rise of the ABU School also referred to as the Islamic Legitimist School. In a path breaking paper presented in September 1960 in Salisbury Southern Rhodesia (present day Harare, Zimbabwe) titled A neglected theme of west African History, Smith

drew attention to the jihads of West Africa and to the internal written sources available for their study. The paper contributed significantly in reducing the significance given to European activity in West African History in the 19th century by insisting on the much greater importance of the Jihads to the people to the Savannah of West Africa. BalaUsman aptly captures the Significance on this paper thus:

Like Trade and politics earlier, the paper literally opened the door to a whole new field of academic research and teaching in Nigeria, particularly at Ibadan and at Ahmadu Bello University where Abdullahi Smith went in 1962 to established the Department of History.

Abdullahi Smith's contribution can be seen also in his views on state formation which were in sharp contrast to the Eurocentric view on state formation in Africa which dwelt on the Harmitic hypothesis. In their book, A Short story of Africa for instance, R Oliver and J D Fage dedicated a whole chapter titled Sudanic civilizations promoting this hypothesis where they contended that the central feature of the sudanic civilization.

... was the incorporation of the various African people concerned into state whose institution were so similar that they must have been derived from a commongoal of head states there were kings to whom divine Honor were paid and attributed. In a very real sense therefore, the Sudanese state was a superstructure elected over village communities of peasant cultivators rather than a society which had naturally out of them.

The facilities and activities further NHRS earlier mentioned were designed to support the general thrust of its sister departments in other parts of the country in addition to complementing them by focusing on the northern region in which it was located and was pioneer.

Key figures of the Abu School and their contributions to West African Historiography

ABU history school became greatly known for its independent, critical and radical scholarship. Led by Professor Abdullahi Smith, the school was percularly championed by two of its leading scholars, the late Dr Yusuf BalaUsman and Dr Mahmud ModibboTukur. Other scholars who defined this epoch in West African historiography at the ABU school of history were DrAlkasum Aba, Professor M.A,Alhaji Mahdi Adamu, SaadAbubakar etc.

Abdullahi Smith

Henry Fredrick Charles Smith later known as Abdullahi Smith was the founding Head of the department of history at Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. Formerly a scholar of the Ibadan school, Professor Smith moved over to the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria in 1962 and in that year, established the Department of History. While at the Ahmadu Bello University, Smith initiated a challenge of the Ibadan school. The Islamic legitimist as they were known:

... Called for a return to time honoured ideals and traditions of scholarship which had formed the basis of intellectual endeavor in the Islamic world for centuries: traditions and

ideals which the ancient universities in the Islamic world had been founded to preserve.

Thus, along with other scholars of the ABU School, the Islamic legitimists through their scholarly enterprise helped put ABU School of History on the world map. Abdullahi Smith introduced to the west the existence of massive archives of Arabic literature and historical records in Nigeria. Which he viewed as the natural result of a powerful tradition of Arabic learning which indeed persist till today. His colonial historiographical methodology essentially distil a conqueror's world view that is inimical to a understanding of the achievement, values and possibility inherent in a people's history.

Smith tore to shreds this euro-centric explanation of state formation which was embedded in the 19th century European intellectual racism. His argument incorporated an alternative interpretation on this subject placing the internal dynamics of economic, social and cultural change at the centre of the process of state formation. He rejected totally the story of a foreign hero usually 'Egyptian', 'Caucasoid', 'Arabian' who comes from afar (as the British did) and imposes himself and his progeny on a previously unorganized people creating new allegiances among them and mustering them into new communities in the form of states. It must be noted here that Smith's postulations influenced Oliver and Fage because in a revised edition of their, *A short History of Nigeria*, they included Smith's views praising his paper in almost hyperbolic terms describing it as a work of seminal importance.

DR. YUSUF BALA USMAN

Dr. Yusuf Bala Usman was born on 4th April 1945 at Musawa in present day Musawa L.G.A of Katsina State. His father Mallam Liman Usman was the son of the famous Alhaji Muhammed Dikko Emir of Katsina while his mother Hajiya Hauwau was the daughter of the famous Emir of Kano, Alhaji Abdullahi Bayero. He was therefore the scion of two important and respected royal families in Northern Nigeria. After obtaining a bachelors degree in history at the University of Lancaster in the United Kingdom, he had a brief stint as a teacher at the famous Barewa College Zaira. It was while at this College that he was discovered by professor Abdullahi Smith and brought over to the Ahmadu Bello University as a lecturer in the department of History and it was here he obtained his masters and PhD.

As a scholar, Bala Usman was thorough and brilliant. The excellence of his academic pursuit is attested to by the corpus of books, treatise, papers & Pamphlets he has left behind as his scholarly legacy. He along with his teacher pioneered a rethinking of post-colonial historiography and the teaching of history in Nigeria.

In colonial historiography this approach was well demonstrated by Bala Usman in a seminar contribution titled *The Critical Evaluation of Primary Sources: Heinrich Barth in Katsina, 1851 – 1854*. He called for written sources to be assessed with the same rigours as oral sources because European written records obtained from travelers, traders, missionaries, governments and their agents which were the most widely used sources for reconstruction of African history for over 500 years. He demonstrated this in his criticism of Dr. Heinrich Barth who between 1851 and 1854 visited Katsina three times and wrote extensively, about his visits and whose views on Africa were considered sacrosanct by most European scholars. Usman contended that Barth's views in his writings about Katsina emirate were limited because of the 62 days spent in

KatsinaEmirate,54 days were spent in BirminKatsina alone. Thus he had only limited knowledge of the emirate. Also Barth's views were also influenced by the 19th century world outlook and the cultural and intellectual environment of the German bourgeois intelligentsia, a section of which was racist. *In The Problem of Categories in the Study of the History of Central Sudan: A critique*, of M.G Smith and OthersUsman further exposed the fallacy of ethnic categorization of history by racist colonia intellectuals.

Dr. BalaUsman did not however confine himself to a mere critique of colonial historiography. His PhD thesis titled *The Transformation of Katsina 1400- 1883; The Emergence and Overthrow of the Sarouta System*, established a new perspective in the study of African history. In the course of gathering data for the book, he visited 150 villages, towns and cities in Nigeria and Niger Republic; conducted over 200 interviews, recovered dozens of manuscripts and made extensive use of Archival materials. With all this massive data, he established that the history of Katsina in the five hundred years that he examined was propelled by changes in the nature and configuration of productive occupations, composition of settlements and structure of lineage beliefs and associated political ideology. The radical nature of Usman's historiography manifests in his insistence that history must be consulted to answer the question of the formation and possibilities of nation state. The lesson of history in other words point at the capacities of nationalities and nation to emerge out of the manucipalities of cultural and ethnic energies available to it. Thus in a lecture dedicated to the memory of Kenneth Dike and the Ibadan school of history, BalaUsman insisted that"

...contrary to the European myth of a primordial and indissoluble racial and ethnic groupings that make up the state, not only nation, nationalities and ethnic groups but even racial groups are product of the historical process and are formed, unformed and transformed in the course of historical development.

In the article entitled, *the Misrepresentation of Nigeria*; the facts and figures, under the auspices of Centre for Democratic Development, Research and Traning (CEDDERT), Usman wrote a new geo-historical alchemy of Nigeria to lend credence to his thesis of absolute control by the Nigeria state over petroleum resources. Bala discarded the pre-colonial histories of the various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria insisting that they should be viewed through the colonial history handed by the British. He held that the groups as we have them today:

... did not form homogenous political communities expressed statehood, neither did they share a sense of collective nationhood. It was the British conquest and subsequent imposition of the colonial state that forged that sense of nationhood and common identity among the individual groups.

Since most communities in Nigeria and indeed Africa did not have written sources the idea of laying emphasis on oral and other sources such as linguistics, Ethnography and archaeology, liberated the writing of African history from.

Cases, such states are known to have had their origins in conquest... these were parts of Africa which had been overrun by late comers of a higher culture than the original societies of cultivators.

Critisms and Conclusion

The ABU School of Historiography has been criticized in several quarters for most of its postulations. Balashm for instance has been seen as acting the script of the grandiose history of the Fulani. In Balaism, major Nigeria nationalities except the Hausa Fulani are seen to have no pre-colonial history. For instance, he posited that the name Yoruba for instance was given by a Hausa Fulani Scholar as there was no group known by that name in pre- colonial times. He also contended that the Niger Deltans never inhabited the current terrain until the British brought them to partake in the protectorate of Nigeria.

Historical research became regionalized and ethicized as most of the historians in this school were seen in some instance as manipulating history for their own religion or political benefit. This point relates to all other ethnic groups and religious organization who in their quest for political power, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa historian disagreed on the calamities which have befallen Nigeria.

Despite the aforementioned one cannot take away the contribution of the ABU School in the reconstruction of West African historiography. Its views about formation of state as well as its critical appraisal of the various governments in Nigeria, and West African revolutionized the way history was written. Rather than sing the praises of the aristocrats as was done by the Ibadan School, the ABU school often criticized government and were always at the receiving end of security agencies. It is thus not surprising that one of the lecturers in the Ahmadu Bello University, a Jamaica name Patrick Wilmot was forcefully abducted by Nigerian security agents and driven from Zaria to Lagos from where he was put on a plane and deported to London. Several other scholars suffered the similar fates for their view at variance with those of the government of the day.

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