

PROBLEMATISING HISTORY AND AGENCY:

FROM NATIONALISM TO SUBALTERNITY

22 - 24 OCTOBER 1997

The Historicity of the Peoples and Polities of Nigeria:

**Observations on Historical Consciousness
and Historiography**

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THE HISTORICITY OF PEOPLES AND POLITIES IN NIGERIA: OBSERVATIONS ON HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND HISTORIOGRAPHY*

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In order to be able to recognise and to purposefully take up the challenges of the 21st century, the peoples of Africa have to, first of all, know who they are, right now; where they are coming from and where they are going. Since, like the rest of humanity, Africans exist as peoples and live in polities, this means that whatever else they may do, they have to comprehend the realities of their existence as peoples and the nature of their polities, in order for them to be able to face up to the challenges of the next century.

Panoramic vistas of the powerful sweep of implacable forces of globalisation, breaking up existing human entities and throwing up new ones, are impressive and can be psychologically overwhelming. But, even if these forces are real, and actually global, and are not just images thrown up by conjuring tricks intended to mesmerise and entrench a particular mind-set with regards to the future of mankind, what they are sweeping along, and changing, has to be the peoples of this continent, existing as specific peoples, in specific polities, or as part of the debris of either, or of both.

Therefore, the comprehension of the nature of the peoples and polities of Africa is an essential foundation of any effort at grasping the actual human realities on the ground in the continent, in these last few years of the 20th century, and the options its peoples actually have in the next century.

* Paper presented at the conference on "Problematising History and Agency."
Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town,
South Africa, 22-24 October, 1997.

Natural Entities

The view about the nature of the people and polities of Africa which is most prevalent in contemporary Nigerian historical consciousness, and has come to be widely propagated in the 1990s, is that Africans as peoples exist as tribes, ethnic groups, nations and races and that this has been the position "since time immemorial", and is going to remain like this as long as human beings exist on this planet, for this is the natural order of things. According to this view, this natural order of things has been violated by colonialism, both African and foreign, which have forcefully amalgamated these natural entities, resulting in the artificial states of contemporary Africa, which, in spite of African nationalist posturings and celebrations have failed to take off, because they are artificial and are built on the violation of these, natural, indigenous, entities.

In current political discourse, the terms, nations and nationalities are the ones more widely used, although the terms, tribes, ethnic groups and races are also used, depending on the point being made. These nations of Africa are supposed to be distinct, indigenous, natural, entities, bound together by a common ancestry, common blood, a common language, common cultural heritage and values, owning a defined territory and sharing a common identity. The existence of differences and variations in location, language, cultural heritage, historical experience and even ancestral associations, are recognised. But, these differences, producing sub-nationalities, are seen as not reducing from the reality of these nations in the past, in the present and in the future. Among these nations are: Arab, Kabylie, Zaghawa, Taureg, Fulani, Kanuri, Angas, Kataf, Hausa, Yoruba, Ashanti, Wolof, Oromo, Urhobo, Igbo, Ogoni, Dinka, Bakongo, Lunda, Luba Tutsi, Hutu, Kikuyu, Luo, Somali, Amhara, Masai, Zulu, Herero, Shona and Xhosa. In Nigeria alone, there are said to be 250 of these. In the whole continent, the number is likely to be over 2000. The artificial states in which these natural entities are said to be imprisoned, and in some cases also carved up, number fifty one at present. But, the fact is that the

only one of these fifty one polities which has fragmented and the fragments remain, for over six years, torn apart by internecine civil wars, is the Republic of Somalia, which is the singular example where the boundaries of the natural entity coincide almost exactly with that of the artificial entity. ~~This~~ ^{These} stark, and challenging, realities of Somalia, however, have not shaken the hold this view has now come to have with regards to the nature of the peoples and polities of Africa.

But it is not only the disintegration of the mono-lingual, mono-ethnic, mono-religious, mono-cultural and mono-ancestral, Republic of Somalia, since 1991, which has called into question this point of view. Anybody familiar with the daily practices of political organisation, political mobilisation and the contests for political power all over Africa, through the ballot box, or on the battlefields, knows that claims of a common blood, a common culture, a common territory and a common identity are part of the contests and part of the battles, and are as natural, or as artificial, as these contests and these battles.

This paper attempts to draw attention to the fact that some of the outstanding pioneers and founding fathers of historical studies in modern Nigerian universities, developed a critical awareness of the limitations of this conceptualisation of the nature of the nations and nationalities of Africa, since the 1940s and the 1950s, and have in the 1970s and 1980s taken Nigerian historiography beyond these, in two seminal studies. But in spite of their contributions in making these advances and their widely acknowledged status as scholars, in the world of learning, and even with the general public, this aspect of their writings has been largely neglected. As a result of this neglect, so much historical writing in Nigeria is ahistorical. This has severely limited our ability to comprehend the actual historical and contemporary realities of our people and our polities. This has favoured the resurgence of tribalist, and racist notions and beliefs, which have come together with other forms of obscurantism to throw dark shadows across the country, darkening the horizons of the economic and political crises situations the country has been locked into since the early 1980s.

The Mingling of Peoples

One of these pioneering scholars is Kenneth Onwuka Dike, whose doctoral thesis, completed in 1950, was published in 1956, as, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria*. In this study, he saw migration into the Niger Delta, due to overpopulation and land hunger in the hinterland and as a part of the trading systems there, which included slavery and slave trade, leading to the emergence of communities which transcended the old tribal entities. He stated that,

*"The seaboard trading communities which emerged with this commerce transcended tribal boundaries, their history belongs both to Atlantic and tribal history."*¹

Dike puts a lot of emphasis on the ethnic heterogeneity of the population of the delta states, even going to the extent of arguing that,

*"..in the peopling of the Delta no one Nigerian tribe had monopoly, Benis, Ijaws, Sobos, Jekris, Ekoi, Ibibio Efik and even the northern Nigerian tribes were represented."*²

This, according to him, produced polities, which would not be regarded as tribal. He said,

*"Moreover, city-state is more appropriate designation than 'tribal state', since the period of migration disorganised the tribal entities and the slave trade further accentuated the mingling of peoples. In the 19th century, therefore, the delta states were grouped not by considerations of kinship but by contiguity and in the period under survey citizenship came increasingly to depend not on descent, but on residence."*³

Dike was not making these points in order to posit some Igbo claim over the Niger Delta. He recognised that before the migration of the Igbo-speaking peoples into the delta, whatever impact it may have had, there had been earlier migrations by other peoples. He cites and contests the statement by

the eminent 19th century African scholar, Dr. James Africanus Horton that,

*"Iboland is separated from the sea only by petty tribes all of which trace their origin from the great race."*⁴

He even went beyond Africanus Horton to contest that position, which apparently was held by other writers. He said,

*"The mistake of ascribing Ibo origins to all the Delta people was common among 19th century writers. It can only be accounted by the great influx of Ibo migrants which blurred the lines of earlier migrations."*⁵

According to Dike this "mingling of peoples" in the Delta, had far-reaching impact even on the legal system, an essential determinant of the nature of citizenship in a polity. He said:

*"The mixture of people often meant that African law and custom vanished and a new law and order was evolved based partly on African precedent and experience and partly on the lessons of the contact with Europe."*⁶

In **Trade and Politics**, Dike seems to take it for granted that there was a pre-colonial Igbo nation. He flatly referred to the Aro as:

*"a section of the Ibo tribe,"*⁷

although pointing out that the issue of Aro origin was not a settled matter, He said the Igbos looked up to Nri as their ancestral home.⁸

Twentieth Century Categories

But over three decades later, after an intensive study of the history of the Aro, with Felicia Ekejiuba, published in the book, **The Aro of South-eastern Nigeria, 1650-1980: A Study of Socio-Economic Formation and Transformation in Nigeria**, Dike had gone beyond "the mingling of peoples" to assert that there was nothing like a natural pre-colonial Igbo nation, race or tribe, and that "Igbo" is a twentieth century category. In a clarification, whose implications for historical consciousness and historiography in Nigeria today, is yet to be realised, Dike and Ekejiuba said,

*"...it is often forgotten, or merely mentioned in the footnote that Igbo is a modern ethnic category which many of the constituent groups have only recently and often reluctantly accepted as their ethnic identity, often on political and administrative grounds. During the period covered by our study, the now twelve million or more 'Igbo' distributed over 30,000 square miles of territory east and west of the Niger were variously referred to either as cultural groups (e.g. the Nri, Isuama, Ezza, or Otanzu), or by the ecological zones in which they are found (e.g. Olu or Oru i.e. the riverain people or Adagbe, people of the flood plain); Enugu, people who live on the hills, Aniocha, people who live on heavily leached and eroded soils; Ohozara, people of the savannah; or as occupational groups such as Opi egbe (people who fashion guns), Ndiuzu or Umudioka (blacksmiths, artists and carvers). Since Igbo was used at this time pejoratively to refer to the densely populated uplands, the major sources of slaves, and by extension to slaves, it is not suprisingly that many of these groups have been reluctant to accept the 'Igbo' identity."*⁹

This study of the Aro, which was one of the numerous research projects into Nigerian history started under the leadership of Dike from the University of Ibadan, in the 1950s and the 1960s, took him beyond seeing the Aro merely as a section of the Igbo, to a realisation of the historicity of the Aro and also of the Igbo nationality, which it has come to be a part of. Dike and Ekejiuba write in terms of the Igbonisation of the Aro, stating that,

*"Even though the Aro are now considered Igbo ethnically and administratively they have not always been so regarded."*¹⁰

From the mingling of peoples, Dike has in the course of the Aro study come face to face with the complex realities of the historical process of the formation

and transformation of peoples and polities. He and Ekejiuba grasped this and point out that the findings of the Aro study has wider implication for contemporary Nigeria. They said:

*"...the story of the emergence of the Aro ... supported by demographic, linguistic evidence and contemporary alignments clearly stress the multi-ethnic base of the Aro. From this perspective, Aro history should be seen as an experiment in poly-ethnic state formation, a percussor of the contemporary incorporation of many multi-ethnic groups into one political unit. A central problem of the Aro history must therefore focus on the processes through which diverse groups and individuals have been welded together into a people with a sense of common identity and commitment to being an Aro. The related conflicts and controversies which are concomitant teething problems of the processes of incorporation into a national identity must not be submerged into the search for consensus, harmony and stability dictated by the brand of social theory the scholar adopts. The implications of the experiment for the Aro system as well as its relevance for contemporary relations in modern Nigeria are important."*¹¹

Dike and Ekejiuba should not be misunderstood over the issue of whether or not an Igbo nationality exists today. They clearly recognise that it does, but that far from this nationality existing before the colonial entity of Nigeria, its emergence is part of the process of the emergence of a Nigerian nationality out of that particular experience of colonial domination.. What they bring out is that the Igbo nationality is the product of historical processes, just as the Aro were also products of historical processes. They call for detailed local studies so that,

"The historical process by which these various groups have become ethnically Igbo during the past eighty years can be

*highlighted, the shared traits and common traditions abstracted and the problem of using Igbo as an ethnographic entity demonstrated by such studies. Such studies will also demonstrate the problem posed by the use of single entities as Igbo religion or political system."*¹²

The challenge thrown to the type of historical consciousness and historiography most prevalent in Nigeria today by the book, **The Aro of South-eastern Nigeria: 1650-1980**, published by the University of Ibadan Press, in 1990, does not represent a bolt from the blues, as far as the historical outlook of Kenneth Dike is concerned. A careful reading of **Trade and Politics**, brings out clearly that he found the tribal conceptions, used in the 1940s and 1950s inadequate for the study of the history of the Niger Delta in the 19th century.

Artificial Boundaries

A strong indication that Dike and Ekejiuba's perception of the historicity of the nationalities of Nigeria is an important part of the outlook of Dike and others at the Department of History, University of Ibadan in the 1950s and 1960s, comes from the doctoral thesis completed by Joseph Christopher Okwudi Anene, in 1960, and published as, **The International Boundaries of Nigeria, 1885-1900: The Framework of an Emergent African Nation**, in 1970, two year, after his death. The thesis was supervised by Dike, who was also the General Editor of, the Longman, Ibadan History Series, under which it was published.

The study was seen by both Dike and Anene as challenging to the established view on the nature of the boundaries between contemporary African states. Dike, in his general editor's note said the book "breaks new grounds."¹³ Anene in his preface thanked Dike for supervising him "in spite of his burdensome duties" and said the book will probably shock its readers.¹⁴ It certainly was path-breaking in a way in which the writer himself did not seem to have appreciated and Dike probably only came to appreciate in the course of his work on the Aro history project, much later on.

Anene accepted the fact that the boundaries of the newly independent African states were imposed by European colonial powers. He accepted the fact that they were artificial. But his argument is that all political boundaries are artificial because they are demarcations made by man. As for the arbitrariness of the boundaries of Nigeria, his view is that any unqualified suggestion of their arbitrariness is misleading.¹⁵

But, before he came to the Nigerian case study he posed questions and challenged the basic assumptions about natural boundaries and artificial boundaries in Africa, which go well beyond the issue of boundaries. He said:

*"Boundary disputes in Europe are said to 'arise in many instances because too much history is remembered by both parties concerned.' Too much history is certainly safer than fictitious history based on generalisations or on popular traditions of conquest, greatness and unity in the past which had ceased to have political significance long before the Europeans appeared on the African scene."*¹⁶

In a warning and a challenge, Anene said:

*"It is extremely dangerous to declare glibly that the international boundaries imposed on Africa by aliens were little adapted to indigenous historical antecedents. What were these antecedents?...we cannot talk of discrepancies between the international boundaries and the traditional frontiers without first examining the character of the indigenous frontiers which the international boundaries are assumed to have outraged."*¹⁷

Turning to Nigeria, he said that:

"...no objective criticism of the boundaries of Nigeria should leave out of account the realities of political and ethnic condition which prevailed in the boundary zones at the time the boundaries emerged. If the result of the negotiations are viewed against the background of these condition one cannot

*escape the conclusion that the boundaries represented to a surprising degree the realities which existed at the time."*¹⁸

He arrived at this position after the meticulous sifting of the evidence which was informed by his critical awareness of the need to transcend the existing categories in order to understand the realities on the ground in the areas where these boundaries were drawn. He said:

*"The problem here is now to define a homogenous African group. The usual reference to collective terms like "tribe" is not necessarily equivalent to the European concept of state which postulates an in-group sentiment, shaped political tradition possibly a common language and the assumption of an ascertainable territorial framework. The idea of a tribe as an isolated and closed group is certainly a myth for many parts of Africa."*¹⁹

Anene also saw that at least two revolutionary movements in the 19th century, the Mfecane and the Jihads,

*"reduces to absurdity any view of Africa during the nineteenth century as a continent neatly demarcated by distinct tribes."*²⁰

Anene's awareness of the impact of the Mfecane in Southern, Central and East Africa and the Jihads of West Africa is not surprising, as among his colleagues at the Department of History of the University of Ibadan were J.D. Omer-Cooper and Abdullahi Smith.

Formation of Peoples

These two, worked very closely with Dike and Anene to build up the study of African history at Ibadan on new foundations. In September, 1960, Abdullahi Simith, or H.F.C. Smith, as he was then known, presented a paper at the Leverhulme History Conference, in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, titled, *A Neglected Theme of West African History: The Islamic Revolutions of the 19th Century.*

This paper was seen as path breaking by drawing attention to the Jihads of West Africa and to the internal written sources available for their study. It contributed in reducing the significance given to European activity in West African history in the 19th century, by insisting on the much greater importance of these Jihads to the people of the savannah of West Africa. 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 the University of Ibadan and at Ahmadu Bello University, where Abdullahi Smith went in 1962, to establish the Department of History.

But the shift in focus brought about by this paper also took place at another level, which was not evident because Abdullahi Smith himself was probably not even aware of it at the time. For all concerned, then and later, the paper fitted into the "African initiative "and" state-formation" slot, and had made its mark.

The shift away from studying the far-reaching cultural, political, social ideological and demographic changes known as Jihads, as tribal conflicts, to studying them as "Islamic revolutions" was a paradigmatic shift. The writer of the paper and his postgraduate students up to the early 1970s, continued to assume that even through Islamic governments were established, the peoples involved were clear and distinct nationalities, as Fulani, Hausa, Wolof, Bambara, Yoruba, Taureg and Kanuri. Even though the issue of what was a "Fulani" in the context of the Sokoto Jihad was clearly a subject of debate, even between Bello b.Usman Dan Fodio and his uncle, Abdullahi b.Fodio, these categories were not questioned, only the interpretation became better informed with regards to social classes and strata, and also cultural and ideological cleavages.

The consequences of this paradigmatic shift evident in 1960, in the paper *Neglected Themes...* only came to realised in the study of the early history of the peoples of the central part of the bilad as-Sudan by Abdullahi Smith. He had shown that to understand the tumultuous changes in the area in the 19th century, it was necessary to grapple with the religious, cultural,

political and ideological contents of the contests that took place and the changes involved, and that we were dealing with revolutions and not inter-tribal wars and therefore have to study the multiple dimensions of Islam. But he still continued to use these categories, in fact questioned them even to a much lesser extent than Dike had attempted to do in his study of the Niger Delta.

But these tribes and nations of the Central Sudan began to unravel as monolithic, natural, entities, when faced with the internal, primary, evidence on the early history of the area. The legends of origin which are seen as the basis of claims of a common ancestry came to be seen as actually explanatory intellectual constructs whose own historical origins had to be studied.

With the publication in 1971 of the chapter "The Early States of the Central Sudan," in the book, **History of West Africa: Vol.1**, edited by J.F.A Ajayi and M.Crowder, Abdullahi Smith proposed an outline of the historical process of the formation of one of the nations which he earlier seem to have assumed was a natural entity. In that seminal work, he explicitly treated the issue of the formation of the Kanuri people. The section of the chapter with that title opened a passage which, addresses squarely the historicity of their formation:

*"the use of the word Kamuri in referring to events in Kanem in the first millenium A.D, is no doubt open to many objections. The antiquity of this word as an ethnic title is unknown. It may be of quite recent origin. But it is proposed to use it here as the name of a group of Teda-Daza-speaking tribes forming a unified group in Kanem from the end of the first millenium A.D, who now go by the name, as no earlier name for them appears to have been preserved."*²²

Abdullahi Smith, as Dike and Ekejiuba did in the study of the formation of the Aro, sought to put a precise date of the formation of the Kanuri nation and identify the political processes that led to it. He said:

"The precise date of the formation of the Kamuri people by

some sort of collection of previously separate Teda-Daza-speaking groups is unknown. But there is reason to believe that it took place during the first millenium A.D, as it appears to be closely connected with the emergence of a central ruling dynasty among them which we can with some degree of confidence assign to the ninth or tenth century A.D."23

Subsequent studies, some of which Abdullahi Smith supervised, or were influenced by the historicity which has informed his outlook, have indicated that the antiquity which he ascribes to the formation of the Kanuri may be doubtful. It is not clear when the term Kanuri applied beyond the groupings formed around the Saifuwa dynasty in its lengthy and extensive career in the Chad Basin.

Conclusion

The study of history is, by itself, an undertaking made rather complex by the fact that the concepts, categories, terms, and even the very language used in the study, are themselves, like the historian, parts of the historical process. The concepts, categories and terms do not come from outside history. A minimum requirement for making a serious attempt at the scientific study of history is, therefore, the critical awareness of the historicity of these concepts, categories, terms and in fact ^{of} the whole exercise of trying to make some sense of the totality of human activity over time.

A number of those who laid the foundations for the study of African history in modern Nigerian universities have developed a critical awareness, of the historicity of the peoples and polities in Nigeria, the grasp of whose nature is necessary if we are to be able to take on the challenges of the 21st century. What has been attempted by Kenneth Dike, Joseph Anene and Abdullahi Smith, has, in spite of all its limitations, provided a basis for continuing the building of the discipline of history in Nigerian, and African, universities with solid roots in the historicity of the peoples and polities of Africa.

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