

## **Marxists Historiography in West Africa**

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**Abstract:** History illuminates the present and satisfies human's curiosity about the past. Thus, there is hardly any nation, region, or continent that does not have its own written history in the present age, as people are the fruits of their history. This paper examines the approaches of African Marxists historians in conceptualizing West African history. This paper relies on relevant literature on West African history and Historiography. It argues that the notion "Africans have no history" is baseless. The fact remains that Africans had and have history which were equally written in books and in the minds of its people. It further posits that for the fact that African histories were not generally written does not mean they never existed.

**Keywords:** Historiography, historical materialism, Marxist, social classes, West Africa etc.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The writing of history has spanned several centuries and its development into an academic discipline testifies to its importance to our societies. Eurocentric views made western scholars pretend that African historiography does not exist and that "Africans have no history" simply because they believed that history is the written account of past events and since Africans devised no widespread form of writing their history, the general belief is that African historiography have no place in world history [1]. This gave rise to Nationalistic Historiography and the spread of Marxist theories. Marxist historiography is based squarely on materialist philosophy. Karl Marx [2] began to study history and developed the ideology of *Historical Materialism*, which is basically an embracing of the idea that everything that exists is natural and that all things happen based on a cause and effect relationship [3].

Historical Materialism was part of the philosophical ideas that proliferated in Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Part of this development was Leopold von Ranke [4] who initiated the professionalization of history as a distinct discipline with its own scientific methodology and tools of analysis [5]. Fredrick Hegel's ideas are encapsulated in the Theory of Dialectical Idealism. To Hegel, history is a dynamic phenomenon and its objective is freedom, but the movement towards this goal is through what is called dialectical process.

The chief tenets of Marxist historiography are the centrality of social classes and economic constraints in determining historical outcomes [7]. In its classical

form, as enunciated by Marx in the 1859 *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marxism interprets the general course of human history by reference to the development of productive forces. In the opening words of the *Communist Manifesto*, [7] "the history [i.e. 'written history'] of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." Marxist 'materialist conception of history' demonstrates the important of 'class struggle' in the movement of history [8].

### **AN OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN HISTORY**

In the past before written records, African historians depended on myth, oral tradition, songs and popular history. Though oral tradition has its shortcomings, its use cannot be done away with despite the problem of chronological sequence [9]. In spite of shortcomings, this technique has been employed for the purpose of collection, preservation and analysis of oral tradition. The African palace historians, who used this method, had done it very well in the past. Legend, songs and popular history had also been used to narrate the past of the people.

The absurdities written by European historians were challenged by educated African historians. The first group was Africans in Diaspora. One of them Dr. Anton Wilhelm, a Ghanaian, who wrote about the contribution of North Africans (particularly the Moors) to the development of Europe through their contact with Holy Roman Empire in 1703. OlaudaEquiano known as Gustavus Vasa, an ex-slave, wrote a biography about the culture of his place of origin, the Igbo land in present day Nigeria. The contribution of Reverend

Samuel Johnson, who published *A History of the Yoruba* in 1921, remains a valuable repository of Yoruba oral tradition for the contemporary historians, no matter where they come from [10].

At the end of the Second World War in 1945, professional African historians emerged to put to rest the propaganda that Africa had no written past or no history at all. In writing the African past, these historians dealt with documents of the past, written and unwritten to reconstruct African past. Prominent among these historians were K.O Dike, S.O. Biobaku, ObaroIkime, J.F.A Ajayi and a host of others. The publication of K.O Dike's *Trade and Politics in the Nigeria Delta, 1830-1885*, marked a remarkable departure from earlier written history of African past. The second was the establishment of Institute of African Studies and Ibadan School of History [11]. There are specific culture history projects like Benin and Yoruba Historical Research Schemes, and Conferences of African History. The new historic tradition rejected the coloration of African past by the European Historians. The tradition, anchored by well-bred African historians, equipped by the validity of non-written sources of historic research, which has been promoted through interdisciplinary approach, led to the discovery and authentication of sources of African past [12]. According to JF Ade Ajayi, African historiography "...is to show that Africa had a history beyond an account of the actions of colonial government..."

Marx's analysis of the working class has encouraged a lot of historians to begin to look into labour history which examines the tradition of struggle in societies. Marxist historiography has made contributions not only to the history of the working class but to oppressed nationalities, and the methodology of history from below [13]. Marxist historiography therefore has made some influence as may be attested to by a number of works on African past. Such works include: 'The Wretched of the Earth', 'Black Skin White Mask', 'How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, The dyad of resistance and oppression inspired magisterial research on Samori Toure by Yves Person, 'Neocolonialism the Last stage of Imperialism'.

### **MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY IN WEST AFRICA**

With the attainment of independence in the 1960s emerged a postcolonial historiography centered within the continent but with significant external liberal support as well [14]. This radical response to the paradigm was prompted by the emergence of Marxist historians, anthropologists and political scientists in the 1970s. It foregrounded class analysts at the global and

local levels [15]. Some of these shall be examined below.

Amilcar Cabral was the revolutionary socialist leader of the national liberation movement that freed Guinea-Bissau from Portuguese colonialism. And his works reflect historical materialistic approach and this made him to be regarded by most people an important historical actor [16]. His political thought has guided the African response to Portuguese rule for more than a decade. Cabral's theory of socialist revolution, true to the methodological materialism of Marxism, is based on a thorough understanding of the real socio-economic situation of the Third World. Cabral argues that the fundamental motive force of history is the development of the forces of production.

He posited that real social change involved winning indigenous control over the forces of production while mere political independence would result in the continuation of imperialism as neocolonialism. Political independence is not the end of the liberation struggle but only a phase within it. History itself, after all, is determined by the development of the forces of production, so a people can only reclaim its history by gaining control over their own productive technologies. Anything less is simply neocolonialism [17].

The Senegalese Marxists today take an increasing interest in the country's democratic traditions, in particular, in the democratic, anti-colonial heritage of Lamine Senghor and his comrades in the anti-imperialist struggle in the 1920s [18]. This interest is quite normal. He was the first among the Senegalese democrats in the world to understand that the world's first socialist country is a natural and reliable ally of the national liberation movement.

Contemporary Marxists authors rely on a solid, scientific tradition, more than half a century old. Everything studied by Marxist Africanist today (parties, trade unions, political ideology as a whole, the contribution to anti-colonial struggle made by separate ideologists, to mention but few), is directly related to similar analysis, if not similar material by earlier Marxist researchers of the region. It is certain that Marxist African studies today are based on a scientific foundation laid way back in the 1920s and 1930s. Back in 1927 this remarkable Senegalese democrat and anti-colonialist was "discovered" and introduced to the French reading public by a member of the Central Committee of French communist Party, the then editor-in-chief of *L'Humanite*, *Paul Vaillant-Couturier*.

He wrote one more book, in which West Africa is mentioned several times and which gives an apt political portrait of B. Diagne, one of the first in

Marxist historiography. However, the second work, which appeared three years after the first, is less Africanist, as it was not published in English and French. One circumstance should be noted here is that, objective factors prevented the early Marxists scholars from clearly understanding the situation. In the post-world war years Marxist thought enriched the historiography of West Africa with new observations, and what is most important, with new appraisal.

The first set of works that attempted a systematic study of the theory and practices of Nigerian historiography were Robert Auker's and Lidwein Kaptejeins's PhD Thesis: "Perspectives of Nigerian Historiography: 1875-1972. The Historians of Modern Nigeria" and "African historiography written by Africans, 1955-73 [19]. These historians have contributed to our understanding of the trends and patterns of Nigerian historiography.

Amadu Bello University, School of Zaria is identified as *Marxist* or the *Radical School* of thought. For instance, the historical writings of Usman Bala Yusuf were largely informed by his view of history and the socio-political and intellectual climate of Nigeria of his days. He did not recognize any disciplinary gulf separating history from other social sciences. Thus, his writings represent a hybrid of history, sociology, economics and political science. However, the dominant view about Bala's historiographical approach is that of the Marxist tradition of historical writing. This seems to be the view of Robert Shenton, Thomas Hodgkins, and Murray Last. Shenton, for example in his view of Bala's *the Transformation of Katsina* asserted that the work "is that of a scholar rooted in historical materialism". Murray Last pointed out that 'Balawas a materialist in his approach to Katsina history' and Thomas Hodgkin also argued in the same vein.

Some critics like Maishanu maintained that while Bala succeeded in establishing the significance of material condition in historical development, 'this does not presuppose that his theoretical framework was necessarily that of historical materialism'. The argument of Maishanu in respect of this debate is that, rather than class struggle, which is the central tenet of Marxist philosophy of history,' what is apparent in the transformation of Katsina is intra-class struggle among the ruling class as they jockeyed around the power [20].

Monday Y. Mangvwat [21] has employed the Marxist concept of primitive capital accumulation and capitalist accumulation as an explanatory tool for the creation of a Nigerian bourgeoisie who have been the managers of the federal nation-state in operation. He has also argued that the same process of creating the bourgeoisie was by, the internal logic of capitalist

development, creating the working classes which the bourgeoisie must exploit. In short, between 1914 and 2007, the main business of the Nigerian nation-state has been the creation of a Nigerian bourgeois society within the rubric of a federal structure. He argued, "I have also argued that regardless of anybody's ideological persuasion, the choice of the federal system by our colonial masters, adopted and internalized by our local leaders was most appropriate and wise" [22] He submitted,

*But the fact that Nigeria is now a federal bourgeois society does not mean that the millions of the exploited masses- the organized working classes, lumpen proletariat ( e.g. Lagos Area Boys), peasants, professional associations and the myriad of civil society groups are just folding their hands and praying for God's intervention. In fact, their undaunting struggle has been responsible for moderating the excesses of the emergent bourgeoisie throughout the almost a hundred years of our federal experiment. To their credit, they have been responsible for resisting attempts at regime perpetuation in Nigeria in the last 22 years, 1985-2007 of this experiment [23].*

Professor Claude Ake is also known for his greatest intellectual contribution to the social science. Professor Ake's theory of Political Integration exposed many of the difficulties confronting the new nations of the world as they emerge from their colonial status and helped to show some of the directions that must be pursued, if these nations must exhibit a higher degree of social and political unity in their- development. This insight in this regard was unique and original especially as it applies to Africa [24]. In his book, *A Political Economy of Africa*, Claude provided the salient features of contemporary Africa, their emergence and their potential in shaping the future pattern of development on the continent. Intellectuals in the universities as well as in the professions have persisted in their enthusiasm for a socialist transformation in spite of the political unpreparedness of Nigerian labour. As explained by Ake:

*This radical consciousness in indigenous social science initially tended to take the form of a critique of western social science and its ideological and value assumption the critique was in turn conceived as part of the ongoing struggle against imperialism it was from such beginnings that some radical social scientists went into a serious study of Marxist and became also part of the movement for under development and dependency theory [25].*

He and other scholars, including Falola, Thonybere and Bade Onimode, have often presented a Marxist analysis of the situation in Nigeria albeit with little or nothing in respect of an actual agenda for a socialist revolution. Toyin Falola and Bade Onimode, stated in their preface 'our work is located within the emerging Marxist political economy genre', and hence 'focuses on class, state, class struggles, contradictions, self-reliance' and the strategies and tactics for the eventual overthrow of capitalism' [26].

There is little doubt that many writers have found emotional release in the rhetoric of socialism. Raymond Duncan [27] has observed that this 'holds a special ideological appeal, given its anti-colonial and anti-imperialistic concepts that so well fit ex-colonial histories and political cultures in third world arenas'. It provides not only comprehensive view of the world but also a plan for 'human progress and inevitable modernization' [28].

As Howard Wiarda [29] has maintained, Marxist promises, prophesies, and visions of an ideal inexorably appeal to those intellectuals in developing countries who feel the need build a power base for themselves. The fact is that the writing of a number of socialist academics is highly tendentious: their subject-matter is devoid of plausibility; their distortion of history is legitimized as creativity, and their message puerile to say the least.

The two progressive ideologies held by the two pioneering and at times most popular politicians, Nnamdi Azikwe and Obafemi Awolowo, could at best be described as pragmatic. Marxism-Leninism- though it advocates have never acquired the power with which to implement its socialism of the orthodox Marxist-Leninist has varies of its advocates in Africa. Festus Iyayi's message in violence is that having suffered from poverty and lack of opportunity the oppressed must answer 'violence with violence'. The hero who provided the recipe for this violentumpharmacorum is Idemudia, one of the many casual laborers to be found in and around the lorry parks of the Nigerian towns and cities [30].

## CONCLUSION

Marxist historiography is based on class struggle and the class struggle is said to represent the contradictions in the economic structure of the society. It has been discovered that Marxist historiography in West Africa evolved over time as a legacy of colonialism and anti-imperialist struggle; which has given Marxism popular support in the region and the continent in general. This radical response to the paradigm shift was prompted by the emergence of African Marxist historians, anthropologists and political scientists in the 1970s. From the beginning of the

1970s, African history branched into various specializations which now produced radical approaches to the writing of African history. It is also discovered that the influence of Marxist Historiography is irrefutable, whether or not one agrees with the political and radical aspects of Marx's overall beliefs.

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