**Abstract**

This paper examined the roles of written records in the documentation of African history. The concept of historiography has been defined, explained and analyzed by various scholars as its meaning and scope is varying.

Also the concept of historiography within historical scholarship has been faced by differing challenges in the writing and reconstruction of Africa’s historical past, hence making the study on written records and African historiography.

This paper aims concisely explain the roles of written records in the reconstruction of African history, stressing the various challenges associated with the reconstruction of African past events, as well as, establishing the level of importance of African historiography.

The methodology in this study is library research. The paper recommends that the study of African history should take the place of European history and European activities in Africa.

**Key words**: Historiography, written records and Africa.

**Introduction**

The continent of African has been of interest to historians, both inside and outside the continent for a very long time. There has always been the desire to reconstruct her past and show the world how great or otherwise Africa had been and her potentials for the future.

Several methods have been employed in this reconstruction process. This paper is concerned with the roles of written records in African historiography.

Written records are important sources of information to the historian. These written records could be transcript; manuscripts, journals, newsletters and newspaper, all classified as primary documents. In addition there are other documents that are considered Secondary sources, this includes textbooks.

Thomas Hodgkin (1952) in “Nationalism in Colonial Africa” states; we shall probably have to wait a little while for the real history of Africa to be written by African scholars for an African reading public.

Many African scholars now feel that the dependence on European writers should no longer continue and have accordingly accepted the challenge of writing African history for African students from the African points of view. The result of this development is the production of a good number of learned publications for African universities where the study of African history has made much progress.

It is to correct the mis–representations and restore the true value and place of African culture and achievements in the sum total of human progress that makes the study of African historiography today a double necessity for both Africans and non-Africans.

Similarly, the old European myth that Africa south of the Sahara was “the land of people without a past and without achievements” has been blasted by amazing discoveries of recent research in African historiography.

Commenting on this, and using the Nok culture as his evidence, Thomas Hodgkin (1952) states; if the inhabitants of the Nigerian plateau were producing the admirable Nok sculptures at a time when the British were being slowly civilized by the Romans, what is left of the myth of Africans as a people without a past?

Basil Davidson adds; historical discovery is now proving that the development and growth of society and civilization in Africa really contradict this stereotype of “centuries long stagnation”.

Africans would derive more useful and meaningful inspiration from the study of their own history than from the study of foreign and unfamiliar European history.

**Conceptual Clarification**

**As Donald Gawronski** (1967) states, historiography is the study of the various approaches to historical method, the actual writing of history, and primarily the various interpretations of historical events. Historiography is the study of the techniques employed by the individual historian.

Historiography is simply a study of the way in which historians have practiced the art and science of writing. Historiography is often refers to as “The history of histories”. It is concerned with the manner in which historians have practiced the discipline of writing. It concerns with the tool or methods which the historian had used from time to time.

Historiography is concerned about the concepts and theories they had adopted and why this has change through time. It deals with all the aspect of history as a discipline and with its components such as the philosophy of history, and the methodology of history.

To Nze Ajah (2005), historiography is all aspects of historical writing which concerns with human history of the past. It is the study of techniques and methods employed by the individual historian.

In the same vein, Furay and Salevouris (1988) defined historiography as the study of the way history has been and is written. The history of historical writing... when you study ‘historiography’ you do not study the events of the past directly, but the changing interpretations of those events in the works of individual historians.

The concept historiography also refers to the theory of historical writing and history. Modern historians aim to reconstruct a record of human activities and to achieve a more profound understanding of them. This conception of their task is quite recent, dating from the development in the late 18th and early 19th centuries of ‘scientific’ history and the simultaneous rise of history as an academic profession.

African historiography is a branch of historiography concerning the African continent, its peoples, nations and variety of written and non – written histories. It has differentiated itself from other continental areas of historiography due to its multi disciplinary nature, as Africa’s unique and varied methods recording history have resulted in a lack of an established set of historical works documenting events before European colonialism.

**Colonial Historiography**

The term “colonial historiography” applies to the histories of the countries colonized during their period of colonial rule, and to the ideas and approaches commonly associated with historians who were or are characterized by a colonialist ideology.

Colonial history arrived with the discovery and colonization of Africa and involved the study of Africa and its history by European academias and historians (Manning Patrick, 2013).

To Robert, A.D. (1978), due to the relative establishment of European academia compared to Africa during the period, as well as the domination of European powers across the Continent, African history was written from an entirely European perspective under the pretense of western superiority.

This predilection stemmed from the technological superiority of European nations and the decentralization of the African continent with no nation being a clear power in the region, as well as a perception of Africans as racially inferior.

Another factor was the lack of an established body of collective African history created in the continent, their being instead a multitude of different dialects, cultural groups and fluctuating nations as well as a diverse set of mediums that document history other than written words. This led to a perception by Europeans that Africa and its people had no recorded history and had little desire to create it.

As K.B.C Onwubiko (1982) states, for long, the Negro peoples of Africa south of the Sahara have been sadly mis-represented in much European oriented history. The Negros have been presented by many European writers as a race “without a past,” a people who never involved a civilization of their own and contributed nothing to human progress.

The world was made to believe that the history of the Negros began with the coming of Europeans to Africa in the fifteenth century. The historical works of the time were predominantly written by scholars of the various European powers and were confined to individual nations, leading to disparities in style, quality, language and content between the many African nations.

These works mostly concerned the activities of the European powers and centered on events concerning economic and military endeavors of the powers in the region.

Examples of British works were ‘Lilian Knowers’ the economic development of the British overseas empires and Allan Mcphoes, the economic revolution in British West Africa, which discuss the economic achievements of the British empire and the state of affairs in African nations controlled by Britain (Roberts AD, 1978).

**Emergence of Africa Historiographical Scholarship**

African historiography has been following patterns, division, schemes, and sequences set by the Europeans who in the past claimed that there was no such thing as African history and that the history of Africa began with the history of the Europeans in Africa.

For instance, Sir Philip Mitchell, in “Africa and the West in Historical perspective”, maintained that until the period of European colonization, Africans were living in the Stone Age, and that they were members of “the only race which has contributed nothing to humanity”.

Archaeological finds in East Africa posited Africa as the cradle of human life, and historical evidence has shown that Africa once stood as a gate way to “awesome civilization”.

Writing African history has been challenging and mostly difficult, due to a lack of both comprehensive written records and holistic archaeological evidence that covers all the zones of Africa from past times. This has left Africa’s historical scholarship in the hands of foreign adventurers, sailors, writers, and amateur historians, most of who never ventured beyond the coastal fringes of the areas of Africa they visited.

Unfortunately, the history of Africa tended to focus on the activities of two groups, the Arabs and the Europeans in Africa. This situation produced a medley of confusion in African historiography, as African history was written merely from the bird’s eye view of aliens and second, was sequenced following patterns of historical developments outside the continent.

The consequence was that Africa’s history and historical sequences became jumbled, and externalities not congruent with trends in Africa’s past and realities shaped her historical timelines.

Some European authors had assailed and even doubted Africa’s historical heritage; one even went as far as to say, “Africa had no history prior to European exploration and colonization, that there is only the history of European in Africa. The rest is darkness”, her past “the unedifying gyrations of barbarians tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe” (Trevor- Roper, 1963: 871)

Even Hegel, in an apparent attempt to besmirch Africa, once asserted that “Africa is no historical part of the world; It has no movement or development to exhibit” (Hegel: 1956, 99, The philosophy of History).

Denying the association of a whole continent with any kind of civilization, in his Races of Africa, C.G Seligman wrote brazening that the “civilization of Africa are the

civilization of the Hamites, it’s history is the record of those peoples and of their interaction with the two other African stocks, the Negro and Bushmen”

(Seligman, 1930).

These trenchant remarks about Africa’s past all arose as a result of the inclination of a section of humanity to debase and denigrate another. The absence of written records in much of Africa posed a great challenge to the historical reconstruction of her past, and this was what spurred African scholars to evolve and insist on the use of oral history in reconstructing it, not minding the gaps inherent in this medium.

Africa’s indigenous historical scholarship did not emerge until well into the twentieth century, when some students from various African States, privileged to get higher education outside Africa, began to return home and teach in a few institutions of higher education that had been set up by the respective colonial powers.

It was through this medium that Africa history was rediscovered. In those few universities that existed in Africa, African history was not taught and never existed in the curricula; it was simply overshadowed by European and American histories.

African nationalist fought against this trend in higher education, and the intellectuals of African extraction who returned and took up the challenges to develop courses on African history. In this struggle to recreate African history, the University of Ibadan took the lead. In Senegal, the university opened in 1950 and in Belgium Congo, a university opened in 1954. Liberia had opened one university way back in 1864 and Sierra Leone opened one in 1876.

These universities began to admit and train African students in the few disciplines existing back then including history. The battle for the creation of African historiography thus began with the return of Africa intellectuals who had gone to study in Europe and America and who now entered academia in their home countries. This first venture towards the “de- Europeanization” or “de-westernization of African history and the writing of books on African history, thereby creating a platform for the development of indigenous African historiography. The first stage, to an extent, set the course for the reconstruction and reordering of Africa’s heritage through the study and writing of African history by Africans.

In the beginning of Africans historiography leading African historians like K.O Dike, A.E Afigbo and S.O Biobaku etc discovered that Greeks, Romans and Arabs had written about Africa long before the Europeans and Americans did, and found a truly scientific impulse with a desire to know. Even though their writings carried some distortions, they were insightful in understanding the realities in Africa. But in the era of slave trade and colonialism, the Europeans had the desire to denigrate the continent and justify exploitation, domination, and colonialism (Afigbo, 1984).

This desire distorted Africa’s realities and her past. African historiography was challenged by the availability of written sources, particularly in places south of the Sahara. Detractors of Africa’s past like Hegel and Trevor-Roper took the absence of written sources to mean that Africa had no historical legacies. The wave of nationalist and Africanist consciousness coming upon the 1940s and1950s produced vibrant and articulate historians who championed African history and studies Africa, which eventually produced novel scholarship on Africa’s past and encounters. This movement was also supported by nationalist leaders in Africa; prominent among them were Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, Leopold Soder Senghor of Senegal, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, and a host of others.

Interestingly, Kenneth Dike was on hand to direct the emerging struggle to recover and reshape the soul of Africa’s historical scholarship, among other peers in West Africa and other parts of black Africa.

Dike was one of the early Africans to have studied history outside the shores of Africa, and he earned a doctorate at an early stage, he returned home to teach in what was the only university in Nigeria – the university college Ibadan.

Dike’s return marked a turning point in the study of history in Nigeria and indeed in Africa in general. In 1956, he was appointed the first African director of a history department at university college Ibadan, from where he rose to become the first African Vice-Chancellor of that university.

His first publication was a magnum, opus titled; Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830-1885, (1956); this blazed the trail on African studies and historiography and was a major breakthrough in realizing Dike’s earlier dream of a rebirth of African historiography using oral history for the reconstruction of African’s past for the first time. When the book was published, indigenous African historical scholarship had developed only outside Africa.

Thus, Dike’s publication marked the beginning of radical historical scholarship inside Africa that took oral traditions as its source for the reconstruction of African’s past and redefined the study of the continent’s history without European endorsement or acceptance.

Attempts were made to discredit oral sources as useful tools for the reconstruction of the consciousness and movement of historical rebirth. Dike believed that subjecting oral history to systematic criticism and supplementing the resulting

residue with evidence from written document after the fashion of Western historiography, as well as with evidence derived from archaeology and other ancillary historical science, would put old-style African history through a process of rebirth (Afigbo, 1984).

In his presentation at the International congress of Africanists in Accra (Ghana), He spoke about “the rediscovery of Africa’s past, and a reorientation of the world attitude to African continent and its past”. (Dike, 1962). Dike’s research and publications had a deep impact on Africanist scholarship, like removing a veil and unlocking Africa’s door to her history.

Soon researchers began to publish wonderful account of various aspects of African history, through the use and deployment of oral evidence. The publication of Dike’s “Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta” inspired more than eight books dealing with aspect of both the pre-colonial and colonial history of Nigeria.

It awakened the use of oral interviews as a substitute of written archival records where those latter did not exist. The publication of Dike’s book and his other papers stimulated the study of history as a discipline among Nigerians and indeed, in many other African countries, especially at a time when Africans had formulated their resentment of colonial domination.

Oral sources and archaeological evidence began to be aggressively deployed in Africa’s historical reconstruction. Dike developed a two pronged approach, African history must be the history of African peoples and not merely the history of their invaders from Europe and Asia, and studies of European contacts in Africa, where European archival materials remain the major source, should focus on the role played by Africans in the event that have shaped the continent (Dike, 1965).

Dike’s efforts as a pioneer in African history later yielded the desired dividends with the emergence of many Africanist historians who pushed further the frontiers of African historiographical reconstruction. This led to the production of eight volumes of Africa’s history sponsored by the UNESCO. Each of the eight volumes of UNESCO’s General History of Africa covered sensitive areas and timelines and was edited by specialists drawn from across the African continent. The authors largely used oral evidence, archaeology, cultural and linguistic evidence to support their positions and argument, hereby strengthening the new theory in African historical scholarship as champion by Dike.

After the UNESCO publications more attention was directed to archaeological exploration across Africa. The post publication challenge of the UNESCO volumes on the General history of Africa was how to sustain the tempo of historical research and documentation ignited by that project.

**The relevance and challenges of written sources to African historiography**

Written sources refer to documents or written accounts which give information about past events concerning people. Examples of documentary sources are; newspaper, diaries, journals, reports of commission of enquiry, books, court records, magazines, government official records etc.

Despite the fact that written sources of African history have pitfalls, we can still describe them as adequately reliable, since the work of a historian is based on historical methods where they use scientific methods in drawing conclusions.

Written records have a high level of precision and very reliable. All the documentary sources e.g. newspapers, personal letters, diaries, journals, manifestoes etc can be reviewed and cross checked for a fair assessment of the past. This process helps to get rid of prejudices, biases to ensure truthfulness.

By putting written records side by side with other forms of evidence, the historian can establish an objective conclusion. In writing African history, one can use the review method to get information by reviewing the written sources such as books, newspapers, journals, broadcasts, diaries, manifestoes, and private letters among others. By reviewing the research through written sources both primary and secondary for information which they examine and cross check.

Even though these written records have short comings and inadequacies, they can be reviewed by the historian to ensure and accurate reflection of the past. This helps to produce unbiased history which is backed by evidence.

**Relevance of Written Sources to African Historiography**

**i.** **Easy to use**

It is easier to use written sources in the reconstruction of African history. This is because books or documents can often be carried from one place to another where the reader or the writer wants to use it. This cannot be done in the non-documentary sources.

**ii. Accurate and reliable facts**

Written records of contemporary issues give first hand information which is naturally more accurate and reliable. This is because dates and events are chronologically well recorded. For example minute of meetings give exact and accurate date, and the time, the meeting was held. Similarly, records written in diaries are recorded on the spot as events occur or soon after. This helped historian to know the exact date for instance the Igbo’s fought with the British because the wars were documented. Written sources help to reduce any tendency of the historian to use guess work in his work.

**iii.** **Effective means of keeping records**

Keeping accurate records of events is very difficult especially where written sources are lacking and people rely solely on oral tradition. One can say therefore that written sources are more effective means or methods of keeping records of past events.

**iv.** **Promotion of research**

Written sources of African history promote research work. For instance, when readers feel that there is deficiency in a written account, they are encouraged to dig further in order to contribute to greater and more accurate knowledge about the issue.

**v**. **Help cross-checking information and provision of detailed information**.

Written sources help in cross checking data or information collected from oral and other sources of historical knowledge. This help to reach reliable conclusions. Documents provide more detailed information than oral sources, e.g. dates, illustrative pictures, names of participants in events etc.

**Challenges of written sources to African historiography.**

**i. Easily destroyed**

Written sources can easily be destroyed by termites, rodents, fire, flood, earthquakes, humidity etc. Written records destroyed by any of these disasters cannot be retrieved unlike oral sources which can be retold. Termites and rodents may also eat away vital information in written forms.

**ii.** **Condition biases cum distortions**

The writer may intentionally write to suit his opinions or leave out some aspects of the events which are not to his liking. For example, some books written by European writer’s states that slave trading is a blessing to the people of West Africa. Others have written in their books that until the coming of Europeans in West Africa, the history of West Africa was only wars and misery.

**iii.** **False information**

Again, one of the strongest challenges of written sources is, once contain materials or information has been written down, people take them to be as fact even when they are not cross-checked.

Not all the information found in writing or books should be taken to be historical truth, there could be a little bit of exaggeration, bias or prejudice.

**iv.** **Expensive**

Written materials are expensive. The writer needs materials like paper, pen, book diary etc to put down events. Also, before one get written materials, they may have to make use of the other sources like archaeology, linguistics etc.

**v.** **Difficult to get/getting lost**

Once again, written materials are hard to come by, especially in Africa where the art of writing started late. Even where they are available, they are fragmentary and far between. Since writing began very late in Africa apart from ancient Egypt, written records are generally scanty and scare. This means that the historian has to rely more on the non-documentary sources, making the work more difficult. Written materials can get lost, thus depriving the people the historical information, if they are the only sources of information

**Viii. Illiteracy**

Documentary sources are written materials that have been put into writing and to be able to read, one needs to be literate. Many Africans cannot read nor write, hence rendering written sources of African history deficient in the reconstruction of African history.

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined the roles of written records in African historiography. The paper notes that African historical scholarship cannot submit totally to the Eurocentic format of historicizing events in Africa; it opined that Africa scholars should reconstruct the history of Africa for an African reading public using oral history/oral traditions.

It also examined the emergence of African historiographical scholarship particularly in Africa south of the Sahara, by looking at the roles of pioneer African historians like Kenneth Dike, Adiele Afigbo, S.O Biobaku etc. who insisted that African history should be about events in Africa and the forces that shaped those events.

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