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THE PERSISTENCE OF COLONIAL THINKING IN AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY: A CASE STUDY

by

Thomas O'Toole

Introduction

Though historical writing about Africa has multiplied in both quantity and quality in the past fifteen years, much of it still bears a colonial flavor. One major difficulty faced by those who wish to teach a decolonized history of Africa is the persistence of colonial-inspired thinking of many African scholars.¹ Many European educated Africans seem to suffer from a peculiar love-hate schizophrenia which results in their perpetuation of colonial viewpoints to the present.²

This article maintains that it is important for teachers and students of African history to consider the paradigms³ through which historians of Africa filter their data. Such an explanation-form⁴ underlying a single historical essay is presented in order to identify the persistence of the colonial paradigm in this particular author's thinking and to reveal the present inadequacies of this explanation-form in African historiography.

A Case Study

An essay by Dr. A.L. Mabogunje in J.F. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, *History of West Africa* (1971) has been specifically chosen as a case study.⁵ Ajayi and Crowder's text is an important reference work for teachers and serves as a general background for all interested in West African studies. The aura of authority and comprehensiveness of this text -- written by over thirty internationally recognized scholars -- lends credence to it and multiplies its effect. Therefore, special importance should be attached to a careful analysis of the crucial first essay in this work, since it maintains the anachronistic colonial paradigm in a readily accessible form. Furthermore, such a text is not subject to the same degree of critical appraisal as a monograph in a scholarly journal would be.

Almost half of Mabogunje's essay is devoted to ethno-

graphic data on the origins and cultures of West African peoples which he has excellent credentials to write about. He served as Professor of Geography and Dean of Social Sciences at the University of Ibadan. His publications include *Yoruba Towns* (1962), *The City of Ibadan* (1967) and *Urbanization in Nigeria* (1969). Yet his explanation-form perpetuates the colonial paradigm in so blatant a fashion that few students of African studies who have come of age within the less ethnocentric paradigms of the past fifteen years will accept his conclusions.⁶ Rather than simply operating within the perspective of the outmoded colonial paradigm, teachers and students should critically examine Mabogunje's explanation-forms before accepting his conclusions.

Inadequate Sources

Mabogunje's own intellectual background, a Ph.D. in Geography at the University of London, in the late 1950s helped to create his basically colonial paradigm.⁷ In his essay, for example, he uncritically uses two outmoded sources. One of these works, Murdock's *Africa: Its Peoples and Their Cultural History*,⁸ contained questionable hypotheses and had a number of glaring inaccuracies when originally published.⁹ Although Murdock personally held few if any overt racist views, he persistently used "Hamitic" as a linguistic term in place of Greenberg's more felicitous "Afro-Asian." Furthermore, Murdock's first-hand knowledge of Africa was limited to three brief visits -- "a week in Egypt in 1921, four days in Cape Town in 1945 and a fortnight in Kenya and Tanganyika in 1959."¹⁰ With excellent monograph material becoming available in the mid-sixties, criticism of Mabogunje for his excessive reliance (six of thirty-two references) on such a weak source becomes justifiable.

Murdock himself revealed his greatest weakness in a field where oral traditions have become crucial to historical reconstruction. He explicitly denied the validity of oral traditions stating: "no dependence whatsoever is placed upon evidence of this type."¹¹ Without oral traditions Murdock had to use the technique of "inferring earlier form of social organization in a particular society from structural inconsistencies."¹² Such inferences prove unacceptable as history because they represent deductions *in abstracto* without empirical foundations.

Extensive use of Gabriel S. Seligman's *Races of Africa*¹³ reveals Mabogunje's uncritical use of sources even more tellingly. As distinguished Professor of Ethnology in Mabogunje's own University of London from 1913 to 1934 (when he chose to become a German citizen!) Seligman held forth with a vengeance praising Caucasian origins for the states of sub-Saharan Africa. Seligman's 1930 division of African peoples into 1) Hamites,

2) Semites, 3) Negroes, 4) Bushmen and Hottentots and 5) Negritos, has been thoroughly discredited by scholars. But its simplicity has made it an extremely popular source for the less knowledgeable. This schema or a further simplified Caucasoid-Negroid-Bushmanoid triad represents a

*. . . mishmash, based on some head measurements (now known to be meaningless), language families (now outmoded by newer classifications based on far more extensive information and finer scholarship), geographic location, and a variant of Herbert Spencer's theory of the conquest origin of the state. At best they form a pseudo-scientific rationalization for a common sense, naked eye view.*¹⁴

Yet Mabogunje retains this racial scheme.

Placing too much trust in such colonial explanation-forms Mabogunje states that a majority of the approximately one million Malinke remain pagan today.¹⁵ Yet presently in the Maninka heartland (Malinke is a French word) Islam forms an integral part of the cultural heritage. One scarcely finds a single village without a mosque even on the fringes of the areas inhabited by the more than four million Maninka.¹⁶

The specious etymology and phenotypical distinctiveness implied in Mabogunje's uncritical statement that ". . . today the Tukolor are regarded as a people of 'two-colours' - the negroid and caucasoid. . ." ¹⁷ allows him to move to the more ridiculous extreme of describing the Fulani (sic)¹⁸ as a ". . .caucasoid group with a strong negroid intermixture."¹⁹ For Mabogunje the ". . .origins of Fulani became a matter of considerable conjecture."²⁰ But this search for extraordinary origins of the Fulbe only reveals the persistent colonial paradigm.²¹ From the middle of the nineteenth century, there was a re-occurring reference to the Fulbe as a "race apart."²² The German linguist Bauman and his missionary colleague Westermann named the Fulbe among the "white African races,"²³ denied that the Tukolor were white and concluded that the originators of the empire of Ghana were Fulbe.²⁴ Yet both maintained that Pularè (the language of the Fulbe and Tukolor) was a "semi-bantu" language.²⁵ Lydia Homburger, a former evangelical missionary, and the Director of African Linguistic at L'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes had translated Bauman and Westermann's work into French. She had stated elsewhere that one could find Egyptian, Coptic and Tagalog words spoken by the Fulbe. She also stated that the Fulbe were white pastoralists who had introduced long-horned cattle to Africa.²⁶ One of Homburger's colleagues and a former colonial administrator, Maurice Delafosse, had written in 1912, that Jews from Cyrenica had helped found Ghana and then become ancestors to the Fulbe.²⁷

Just as the Wolof and their other African neighbors consider the Tukolor and Fulbe as both being hapularen²⁸ with little regard for phenotype differences most Africanists have also dropped such forced distinctions. It would seem that if Mabogunje was not trapped within his colonial explanation-form, he would realize that the uncritical use of secondhand sources in Europe and America has gradually given way to more fruitful studies of the Tukolor and Fulbe in an African context. Most probably the origins of both the Fulbe and Tukolor can be found within the confines of the present nations of Mali, Mauritania and Senegal, and there is no need to posit "external" white invaders to explain their origins.

Elsewhere Mabogunje's use of secondary sources proves inadequate for a college textbook which seeks to be "authoritative." His acceptance of Seligman's view that the Kanuri owe their "higher civilizations" to Arab conquest seems questionable. In Mabogunje's defense one should note that the basic non-Arabic sources available to him included H.R. Palmer's *Bornu, Sahara and Sudan*²⁹ and Y. Urvoy, *Histoire de l'Empire du Bornu*.³⁰ These secondary works by former colonial officers represent the outmoded historiography that mars much of the present day understanding of precolonial West Africa. Palmer especially had a tendency to construct far-fetched linguistic comparisons of African words with Greek and ancient Egyptian vocabularies. From Kanuri sources, it is quite certain that the Sefawa dynasty which ruled Kanuri from the ninth or tenth centuries until 1846 found its base in indigenous models rather than those of an imposed Arab or Berber hegemony.³¹

With the Hausa, again, Mabogunje simply states a Muslim tradition common in Kano today that the Hausa States (and by extension the Yoruba) derive from "Bayajidda, son of Abdullahi, king of Baghdad."³² Of course, even M.G. Smith's view that the origin of the Hausa people can be found in an admixture of Berber immigrants with black populations of the savannah represents only a variant of the colonial explanation-form.³³ One can understand the birth of *birane* (city states) among the Hausa in many other ways than conquest or migrant hero "civilisateurs".³⁴

When Mabogunje turns to the "forest dwellers" among whom he numbers his own people, the Yoruba, he goes from errors resulting from an uncritical acceptance of secondary sources to outright factual mistakes. West of the Bandama River, he says, there are ". . . numerous small tribes who exhibit cultures far less complex than those we have so far considered but who reveal an appreciable measure of cultural homogeneity."³⁵ Among these he considers four "worthy" of special mention -- the Kru, Kpelle Mende and Temne.³⁶ All of these groups he says ". . . linguisti-

cally. . . belong to Greenburg's Kwa division of the Niger-Congo group."³⁷

One can accept that there exist some universal cultural patterns shared by all peoples. But Mabogunje's failure to note the almost infinite diversity of forms that these general patterns take proves misleading. Anyone who has lived among the Kpelle and Mende can posit great cultural differences between these two peoples. Furthermore, only the Kru belong, even tentatively, to the Kwa linguistic group.³⁸ The Mende and Kpelle once shared the *Poro* "fraternity" and *Sande* "sorority" with the Temne. But the Temne speak a West African language while both the Kpelle and Mende speak forms of western Mende.³⁹

Perhaps the non-centralized peoples of West Africa seemed a "welter of tribes"⁴⁰ to Mabogunje while he was studying in London during the late 1950s when colonial historiography about Africa prevailed. More recent historiography seeks to avoid assumptions which flow from such obviously colonial models.⁴¹ It seems likely that Mabogunje's persistent use of value laden terms and colonial perspectives results from his uncritical acceptance of the dominant racist or at least Eurocentric views of Africa's past which he incorporated as a graduate student in England.

This colonial paradigm could also account for Mabogunje's conclusions ". . . that most historical movements of the past have been influenced by various "'push' factors emanating from the international relations of West Africa with peoples of northern and Saharan Africa,"⁴² and that the governments of the various West African countries ought to ". . . organize the development of their land and peoples as to accelerate the movement into the cities [in order to create] out of the welter of tribes nation-states whose glory and importance may yet surpass those of the various empires that emerged in West Africa in the distant past."⁴³

The colonial interpretations of the origins and development of major state forming peoples such as the Fulbe, Akan, Fon, Mande, Wolof and Yoruba emerged from colonial social realities. Theories that maintain that all societies should evolve toward centralized states with urban centers like those of the "West" and corollaries which hold that societies which did not evolve such states and urban centers would prove inferior to more organized groups were very widespread in colonial times.⁴⁴ Thus, the dominant Western views of African history have remained, until quite recently, racist or at least Eurocentric. Even as some of the more overtly racist views about Africa receded, these state theories persisted often maintaining that the centralized state was brought to Africa by the Hamites,

allegedly, a branch of the "Caucasian" race.⁴⁵ Mabogunje's overemphasis on northern conquest origins for West African states perpetuates this view. His explanations for the states of West Africa accepts the view that nomadic "Hamitic" (Berber, etc.) invaders from the Sahara or further north imposed a state-like structure on a number of politically segmented agricultural peoples in the grasslands and forests south of the Sahara and thus led to the formation of states in black Africa.⁴⁶

Such simplistic and superficially reasonable explanations of complex processes fit Western ideological framework but do not necessarily correspond to newer perceptions or realities of Africa. Persistence of such interpretations compound the difficulties of cross-cultural understanding and data interpretation. Only a critical historical study of the explanation-forms of scholars who hold such theories can help students free themselves from the straight jacket of both personal and socially formed interpretations.

Even Mabogunje, elsewhere, has hinted that the origins of urban life and state formation might have origins other than those of outside conquest. For his own ethnic group, the Yoruba, Mabogunje has discovered that besides local trade of residents in a town there existed, before the nineteenth century, an extensive system of periodic markets between kingdoms. He noted that this trade was usually conducted along north-south routes and was most widespread in the open grassland in the northern half of Yorubaland. Yet Mabogunje apparently remained so committed to the external origins hypotheses that he failed to see that trade needs might have necessitated the internal creation of religio-political linkages rather than an imposed unity.⁴⁷

Conclusion

It becomes obvious that the colonial paradigms in African history are at a crisis point⁴⁸ and that new explanation forms which relate historical events in Africa to processes in which human societies in general participate must take their place. Studies operating from an internal African perspective⁴⁹ can help to clear up a heritage of enormous confusion in the ethnographic and historical literature of precolonial West Africa. Furthermore, a deeper, more meaningful understanding of the integrated use of oral traditions and anthropological, geographical and linguistic as well as more traditional historical sources for teachers and undergraduates will emerge from classes which critically confront the outmoded colonial explanation-forms.

Footnotes

1. The unquestioned racist and ethnocentric assumptions that Africa was culturally and intellectually inferior to the colonial powers. See Bohannan, Paul and Curtin, Philip, *Africa and Africans*. rev. ed. (Garden City, New York: The Natural History Press, 1971), pp. 223-224.
2. See Chinwizu, *The West and the Rest of Us*. (New York: Random House, 1975), pp. 292 ff and *passim* for an insightful critique of this problem.
3. Paradigm is used here in the sense employed by Thomas S. Kuhn, i.e.: ". . .the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community." Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 175.
4. This key term is Gene Wise's. He uses it as a parallel in historians' communities to Kuhn's "paradigm" in scientific communities. Wise, Gene. *American Historical Explanations*. (Homewood, Ill., The Dorsey Press, 1973), p. viii.
5. Mabogune, A.L., "The Land and Peoples of West Africa," in *History of West Africa*. Vol. I, J.F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder, eds. (London: Longmans, 1971), pp. 1-32.
6. Curtin, Philip D. *Precolonial African History*. (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1974), pp. 63-66.
7. Or at least let's assume that this is the case and then see how it helps to explain much of Mabogunje's thought. See Wise, Gene, "Pictures in Our Heads: Symbolic Forms Amid the Flux," in *American Historical Explanations*. Wise. 1973, pp. 3-32, specifically, p. 7.
8. Murdock, George Peter. *Africa: Its Peoples and Their Cultural History* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959).
9. Reviewed by Gulliver, Phillip H., *American Anthropologist*. LXII (Oct., 1960), pp. 900-903. See also J.D. Fage's review article, "Anthropology, Botany and the History of Africa," *Journal of African History* II (1961), pp. 299-309; and Vansina, Jan, "The Use of Process-Models in African History," in *Historian in Tropical Africa*, Jan Vansina, Raymond Mauny and L.V. Thomas, eds. (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 375-389.
10. Murdock. 1959, p. vii.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 301.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
13. First published in 1930 and reprinted in 1957 and again in 1966 with no real changes. See Seligman, Gabriel S. *Races of Africa*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1966).
14. Bohannan and Curtin. 1971, pp. 42-43.
15. Mabogunje. 1971, p. 18.
16. Based on the present writer's personal knowledge gathered on a study trip in Mali, Senegal, Upper Volta, the Gambia and Sierra Leone in 1970 and two years residence in Guinea. These perceptions were verified in conversation with Dr. Lansiné Kaba, Associate Professor of African History, University of Minnesota, himself a Muslim Maninka and Kankan and Mr. Mark LaPointe, long time resident of Mali and Guinea. See also Bird, Charles S., "The Development of Mandekan (Manding): A Study of the Role of Extra Linguistic Factors in Linguistic Change," in *Language and History*, David Dalby, ed. (New York: Africana Publishing Corps., 1970), pp. 146-159.
17. Mabogunje, 1971, p. 19; the spelling of negroid and caucasoid are Mabogunje's.
18. These people are more properly named Fulbé though in singular this is pul-lo and hence the Wolof and subsequent French term Peul. Fulani comes into use in English through British adoption of the Hausa term. See Labouret, Henri, "La Langue des Peuls ou Foulbé" (Dakar: IFAN, 1952), p. 2; and Greenberg, Joseph H., *The Languages of Africa* (Bloomington, Indiana: The University of Indiana Press, 1966), pp. 24-25. In this essay the anglicized Fulbe will replace the linguists' Fulbé.
19. Mabogunje, 1971, p. 26.
20. *Ibid.*
21. The Fulbe are "one of Africa's great enigmas. . . there can be little doubt that they originate elsewhere. . . [than] where they have been living for well over 1000 years." Johnston, H.A.S., *The Fulani Empire of Sokoto* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 17.
22. See for example, D'Eichthal, Gustave, *Histoire et Origins des Foulans ou Fellahs* (Paris: Mme. V^e Donday-Duprè, 1841) who sought to prove that the Fulbe were Polynesians.

23. Bauman, H. and Westermann, Diedrich, *Les Peuples et les Civilisations de l'Afrique suivi de Les Langues et l'Education*. Lydia Homburger, trans. (Paris: Payot, [1948] 1957), p. 389.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 391-392.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 457.
26. Homburger, Lydia, *Les Langues Nègro-Africaines*. (Paris: Payot [1941] 1957), pp. 322-323.
27. Delafosse, Maurice, *Haut Sénégal-Niger*. Vol. II (Paris: E. LaRose, 1912), p. 219.
28. Pularé speakers.
29. Palmer, H.R. *The Bornu, Sahara and Sudan*. (London: J. Murray, 1936).
30. Urvoy, Y., *Histoire de l'Empire du Bornu* (Paris: LaRose, 1949).
31. See Smith, Abdullahi, "The Early States of the Central Sudan," in *History of West Africa*. Vol. I, J.F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder, eds. (London Longmans, 1971), pp. 164-174.
32. Mabogunje, 1971, p. 20.
33. Smith, M.G. "The Beginnings of Hausa Society A.D. 1000-1500," in *Historian in Tropical Africa*. Jan Vansina, Raymond Mauny and L.V. Thomas, eds. (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 339-357.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 187-196.
35. Mabogunje, 1971, p. 25.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
38. Greenberg, 1966, pp. 38-39.
39. Greenberg, 1966, p. 8; Gibbs, James L., Jr., "The Kpelle of Liberia," in *Peoples of Africa*, James L. Gibbs, Jr., ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), pp. 197-240; and Kenneth Little, *The Mende of Sierra Leone*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1951).

40. Mabogunje, 1971, p. 32.
41. See Fage, J.D., "Continuity and Change in the Writing of West African History," *African Affairs* OCLXXX (July, 1971), pp. 236-287.
42. Mabogunje, 1971, p. 30.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
44. See Bohannan and Curtin, 1971, pp. 3-15 and 135-147; and Harris, Joseph E., "A Tradition of Myths and Stereotypes," in *Africans and Their History*. (New York: New American Library, 1972), pp. 11-25.
45. See Sender, Edith R., "The Hamitic Hypothesis: Its Origin and Function in Time Perspective," *Journal of African History* X (1969) pp. 521-532.
46. Page, J.D., *A History of West Africa*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1969), pp. 6-10.
47. Mabogunje, Akin L., "Urbanization and Change," in *The African Experience*. Vol. I, John N. Paden and Edward W. Soja, eds. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 331.
48. ". . .A paradigm strain. . .where one's forms for thinking don't jibe with what he sees." Wise, 1973, pp. 179-180.
49. Using explanation-forms of the "Wisconsin school" sort. Curtin, 1974, p. 58.

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