

The Image of Pre-Colonial Africa in European Circles

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Abstract

Cultural relativism denotes the suspension of personal and moral or value judgements about other peoples and their ways. This is very essential for a successful and objective study of the past. It also enhances successful living in the modern, multi-cultural or racial world. It teaches that before forming an opinion, one should critically examine and understand the situation. It does not emphasise any requirement of embracing the beliefs or value systems of foreigners or giving up one's own values. Contrarily, it preaches the granting of respect to a society, people, or country, trying to see their world and behaviour from their own perspectives, rather than simply rejecting all viewpoints but one's own. European scholars who attempted to reconstruct the past of Africa did not take into consideration the tenets of the historical profession and wrote about Africa from their point of view. The result was that a whole lot of wrong impressions were created about Africa and its peoples. This study, using the multi-disciplinary approach, examines some of the wrong impressions Eurocentric scholars have created about Africa and Africans.

Keywords and Phrases: *Africa, colonial historians, Eurocentric scholars, European impressions, image, pre-colonial Africa.*

Introduction

In some instances, researchers misinterpret facts they are not familiar with. In others, they find it difficult to detach themselves completely from events they describe and, thus, make wrong assumptions about unfamiliar facts, and sometimes intentionally about familiar ones in order to achieve some set objectives. Grave misunderstanding, however, always arises when people attempt to understand the institutions of other unfamiliar societies in terms of the familiar and unquestioned categories of their own cultures. Due primarily to instances of this nature, historians generally do not agree on the issue of passing judgements on events and actions of peoples of other societies, particularly those of the past, whose values differed significantly from those of modern societies. European writers¹ would not comply with the historians' noble advice. Before, during and after imposing colonial rule on Africa, the European imperialists, for purposes of effective administration and the promotion of capitalist enterprise, became concerned to appropriate knowledge about Africa. Quantities of historical material were amassed and collected in colonial archives and libraries. Much of this knowledge was historical. The

colonial period, however, produced very little in the way of overtly historical publication. In fact, the works produced by European writers were generally nothing more or less than a luggage of wrong impressions about Africa and its people. The general impression given by European explorers, missionaries, colonial administrators, and other agents was “one of caprice, of treachery, of violent extremes, and of hostility to men ...” in Africa (Perham and Simmons, 1957:16). The general perception or view in European circles, therefore, was that pre-colonial Africa was a place of complete and anarchic savagery and barbarism. In their descriptions of Africa, European writers saw the events in their narratives through the eyes of the administrator and soldier, the settler, trader and missionary. This paper examines some of these Eurocentric impressions about pre-colonial Africa and its indigenous peoples to show that the image of Africa as portrayed in colonial historiography is considerably distorted and, as a result, denigrates Africa.

A Puzzling Skin

Europeans’ explorations of other parts of the world and their geographical discoveries beginning in the fifteenth century brought them into contact with other humans whose physical appearances seemed strange to them. Being Europe’s closest neighbour, Africa was the first continent that European navigators came into contact with. Europeans found the inhabitants of Africa completely different from themselves in many respects. Of all the factors of differentiation, the colour of the African² was the most arresting characteristic and, indeed, the most puzzling. Generally, Europeans saw that “In colour they [that is, Negro Africans] are very black” (Lugard, 1965:68). So fascinating was the Black African’s complexion that European travelers rarely failed to comment upon it in their reports. Consequently, the first item they mentioned when describing Black Africans was their complexion and then moved on to dress, or the lack of it, and manners. The people of Cape Verde, for example, were described as “all blacke [sic], and are called Negros [sic], without any apparel, saving their privities” (Jordan, 1969:4). Robert Baker’s narrative poem relating his two expeditions to the coast of West Africa in 1562 and 1563 first introduced the indigenous people with these engaging lines:

And entering in [a river], we see
a number of blacke soules,
Whose likeliness seem’d men to be,
But all as blacke as coles.
Their Captaine comes to me
As naked as my naile,
Not having witte or honestie
To cover once his taile.³

Even more sympathetic observers seemed to find blackness a most outstanding quality in Negroes. The tendency to emphasise the colour of Negroes was more prevalent among the English than it was with other Europeans. Blackness became so generally associated with Africa that every African seemed black. Even the people of North Africa appeared so dark that Englishmen tended to refer to them as “black”. In the days of Shakespeare, the Moors were commonly portrayed as pitchy black and the terms *Moor* and *Negro* were used virtually interchangeably (Jordan, 1969:5). The Europeans,

however, later recognised that Africans south of the Sahara were not at all the same people as the Moors who were much more familiar to them. Sometimes they referred to the Negroes as “black Moors” in order to distinguish them from the North African peoples. The distinction became more firmly established during the seventeenth century. Writers, of course, came to emphasise the difference in colour, partly because they delighted in correcting their predecessors and partly because Negroes were being taken up as slaves, and Moors, increasingly, were not. In the more detailed and accurate reports about West Africa of the seventeenth century, Negroes in different regions were described as varying considerably in complexion. A Spanish chronicle translated into English in 1555 was filled with wonder at the variety of the Negro colour. It carried the remark:

One of the marveylous thynges that god useth in the composition of man, is coloure: whiche doubtless can not be white and an other blacke, beinge coloures utterly contrary. Sum lykewyse to be yelowe whiche is betwene blacke and white; and other of other colours as it were of dyvers liveres (Jordan, 1969:7).

Concomitant to the over-emphasis on colour was the view that Blacks were the ugliest of humans. Juxtaposing the Black against the Indian, Hugh Jones asserted that the Indian “seem to be a different Breed from the Negroes, who are blacker, have uglier Faces and Bodies ...” (Barker, 1978:43). Whilst denigrating the black complexion, Europeans praised their colour and felt it was the most beautiful of all. On this issue, Oliver Goldsmith declared:

Of all the colours by which mankind is diversified, it is easy to perceive, that ours is not only the most beautiful to the eye, but the most advantageous. The fair complexion seems, if I may so express it; as a transparent covering to the soul ... (Barker, 1978:42).

Stunned by the colour of the Negro, Europeans made attempts to explain the cause of that unique puzzle. The first explanation offered for the problem was some sort of reference to the action of the sun, whether the sun was assumed to have scorched the skin, drawn the bile, or blackened the blood. In ancient times, the Greeks held the same view, though they were not able to draw curtains on the puzzle. They held that,

The Æthiopians then were white and fayre [sic],
Though by the worlds [sic] combustion since made black
When wanton Phaeton overthrew the Sun (Jordan, 1969:11).

This theory created problems. It was questioned that if the equatorial inhabitants of Africa were blackened by the sun, why not the people living on the same line in America? Logic required them to be of the same colour. Another problem was that those Negroes who were taken to Europe and the Americas were not whitening up noticeably

under the colder climates of these regions. These arguments made some European scholars come to regard the Negro's blackness as permanent. Still not satisfied with the naturalistic explanations, some of them sought interpretations from the Bible. Some writers believed that God's curse on Ham, or his son Canaan, and all their descendants was entirely adequate to explain the colour of the Negroes. The writings of the great Church fathers, such as St. Jerome and St. Augustine referred to the curse in connection with slavery but not Negro Africans. Meanwhile, they accepted the assumption that Africans descended from the four sons of Ham. Moreover, though the Bible does not state the complexion of Ham, they were aware that the term *Ham* originally connoted both 'dark' and 'hot'. Although they failed to seize on this obvious opportunity to account for the blackness of Negroes, the Talmudic and Midrashic sources contained suggestions as that "Ham was smitten in his skin," that Noah told Ham that his descendants would be ugly and dark-skinned, and that Ham was the father of Canaan who brought curse into the world and darkened the faces of people, and that Ham was the father of Canaan, "the notorious world-darkener" (Jordan, 1969:18). This scriptural interpretation of the Negro's blackness through the curse provided a satisfying answer which the climatic theory could not provide. Those who were not convinced either with the climatic theory or the curse model remained humble and attributed the blackness of the African to God's peculiar will and ordinance.

Racial Segregation and the Ingrained Virtues and Defects of Africans

Racism has been a major determinant of European relations with other peoples. This venomous feature, with a long tradition in European culture and civilisation, derives from the irrepressible tendency on their part to differentiate between peoples for different treatment and purposes. Probably due to their coming to the realisation that Africans were not all the same as they previously mistakenly thought, many European writers made strenuous, but useless, efforts to distinguish between different African groups of people in their studies. In describing the people of British tropical Africa in his study, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, Lord Lugard told his European-, or Western-, intended readers how essential it was "... to realise that tropical Africa is inhabited by races which differ as widely from each other as do the nations of Europe, and that some of the principal racial types present even greater divergence than those of Europe and parts of Asia" (Lugard, 1965:67). With the emphasis on the 'greater divergence' of tropical Africa, Lugard eventually concluded that "Broadly speaking, the coloured population of tropical Africa divides itself into the races of Asiatic origin which have penetrated the continent from the north-east and east, with their negroid descendants, and the negro tribes which inhabit the greater part of the remainder" (1965:67).

The "... negro blood ..." was believed to be so strong that through sexual contact with the Hamites, it "... produced racial types differing from each other, and widely different from the negro type" (Lugard, 1965:67). The products of the miscegenation were reckoned to "... vary in their mental and physical characteristics according to the amount of negro blood in their veins ..." (Lugard, 1965:67). Lugard believed that "Perhaps the most distinctive external characteristic—much more reliable than that of colour—by which the degree of negro blood may be gauged, is the hair growth on the head and face, varying from the woolly head and smooth face of the pure negro, to the straight hair and bearded face of the Asiatic" (Lugard, 1965:67). To them, Negro Africans could

generally be identified by their "... thick lips, ... bridgeless nose, and prognathous jaw." Probably to caution against mistaking them for the pure negro, Lugard told his readers that "The Hamites and Hamitic negroids are "slim and wiry in build, markedly dolichocephalous, with high narrow foreheads, good features, reddish complexions, plentiful frizzy hair, and small hands and feet" (Lugard, 1965:67). From their comments, colonial historiographers appeared to have found the variations clear and accurate enough to employ as a yardstick for their taxonomy of Africans. Whatever the case may be, it must be mentioned for emphasis that all these attempts at segregation were to find a location for the Negro African on the ladder of human hierarchy.

Though Europeans saw Africans as different peoples, they could all the same see some particular characteristics that run through the lives of all of them which they tended to emphasise. On the good side, pure Negro Africans appeared to Europeans as

Powerfully built, ... [and, for that reason,] ... capable of great feats of strength and endurance. Individuals will carry a load of 100 lbs. on their heads from morning till night, up hills and through swamps, with brief intervals for rest. ... the typical African of this race-type is a happy, thriftless, excitable person, ... naturally courageous, ... courteous and polite, fond of music, ... and will work hard with a less incentive than most races (Lugard, 1965:67).

Nonetheless, "His most universal natural ability lies in eloquence and oratory." On the bad side, however, Europeans discovered in their observations that

... the typical African ... is ... lacking in self-control, discipline, and foresight, ... full of personal vanity, with little sense of veracity, ... and "loving weapons" His thoughts are concentrated on [only] the events and feelings of the moment, and he suffers little from the apprehension of the future, or grief of the past. ... He lacks power of organisation, and is conspicuously deficient in the management and control alike of men or business. He loves the display of power, but fails to realise its responsibility. ... He is by no means lacking in industry He is very prone to imitate anything new in dress or custom, whether it be the turban and flowing gown of the Moslem, or the straw hat and trousers of the European, however unsuited to his environment and the conditions of life (Lugard, 1965:67).

Another mordant European view about Africans, an opinion traced to the period around 1540, was that "The Negroes of Guinea are haphazard in their habits of eating. They have no set time for meals, and eat and drink four or five times a day, drinking water, or a wine which they distil from palms. They live for the best part of 100 years" (Davidson, 1970:36). One reporter observed that "Another (as it were) innate quality they

have [is] to Steal any thing they lay hands on, especially from Foreigners ... this vicious humor [runs] through the whole race of *Blacks*”, while another felt that

it would be very surprising if upon a scrutiny into their Lives we should find any of them whose perverse Nature would not break out sometimes; for they indeed seem to be born and bred Villains: All sorts of Baseness having got such sure-footing in them, that ‘its impossible to lye [sic] concealed (Jordan, 1969:25).

In April, 1937, a meeting of European alluvial gold diggers in Tanganyika Territory (Tanzania) passed a resolution protesting against the Government’s policy of allowing Africans to take out prospecting rights in a controlled area. They argued that “‘The effect on a native of a sudden acquisition of £40 or £50 – to him comparative wealth – often turns his head, and as he quickly spends his money he is tempted to obtain more gold by illegal means”” (Firth, 1970:14). Their argument was “... that as a result of there being so many native prospectors, illicit gold-dealing had become rampant in the area; European diggers’ gold was being stolen and their very existence was threatened” (Firth, 1970:14).

The generally negative attitude on the part of the Black African provided ready ‘proofs’ for Europeans to believe that the African possesses a distinct type of psyche, a being *sui generis*. This assumption led many of them to draw untenable conclusions about the thinking ability of the African. A.B. Ellis, for instance, was of the contention that Africans evince a degree of intelligence

which, compared with that of the European child, appears precocious; and they acquire knowledge with facility till they arrive at the age of puberty, when the physical nature masters the intellect, and frequently deadens it. This peculiarity, which has been observed amongst others of what are termed the lower races, has been attributed by some physiologists to the early closing of the sutures of the cranium. ... They can imitate but they cannot invent or even apply. They constantly fail to grasp and to generalise a notion (cited in Casely Hayford, 1969:vi).

In view of the fact that they could identify different races within the larger African group, one would have expected them to be cautious in their generalisations about all Africans, whom they lumped together in their theories. Some of them appreciated the mistake in such venture, but they went ahead to argue that “... speaking generally, the characteristics of the predominantly negro races are, I think, as I have described them ...” (Lugard, 1965:70). From these general but unscientific assumptions, European writers could not give the so-called savage African the status of a cruel adult but that of “... an apt pupil, and a faithful and devoted friend.” For, they believed that “In brief, the virtues and defects of this race-type are those of attractive children, whose confidence when once it has been won is given ungrudgingly as to an older and wiser

superior, without question and without envy ...”, bearing “... no malice and ...” nursing “... nor grievance” (Lugard, 1965:70). For a people to acquiesce in their inferiority is tantamount to the realisation of their lower status amongst humans.

A Lower People

As they discovered different groups of humans one after another, Europeans increasingly began to wonder the relationship between the different human creatures. The purely physical differences among humans gradually grew to acquire heightened significance and greater relative importance. A ridiculous theory, Anglo-Saxon superiority and black African inferiority, was formulated to account for the respective positions of the European and Black African on a fraudulent racial hierarchy or ladder. This specious ideology, cleverly woven to justify the alleged African ‘backwardness’ and differentiate between Africans and Europeans, also featured prominently in and influenced nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ European thinking and writing about Africa. European biologists, including Count Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, Linnaeus, Buffon, Blumenbach, Georges Cuvier, etc., had, since the eighteenth century, been making strenuous efforts to classify and understand the world around them. They labelled the animal kingdom and fitted it into place, hierarchically organised in view of the assumptions that a Great Chain of Being reached from God down to the least creature. They fitted humans also into this system. Humans were put at the apex of all living things, and the human races were hierarchically arranged, with Europeans at the pinnacle and Black ‘Negroid’ Africans at the bottom. For example, in his *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, Gobineau divided the human race into four main groups, each having its own peculiar qualities. He characterised Africans as unintelligent and lazy; Asians as smart but docile; the indigenous peoples of the Americas as dull and arrogant; and Europeans as intelligent, noble, and morally superior to all other races (Bentley and Ziegler, 2003:958). During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many European anthropologists portrayed people of European descent as biologically and culturally superior to all other peoples. Racist thinkers sought to identify racial groups on the foundation of physical characteristics such as skin colour, bone structure, the width and shape of the nose, the shape of lips, cranial capacity, and the size of genitalia. Writers like Richard Burton and Winwood Read argued that the black race was the least in the different stages of evolution.

Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, which propagated the slogan of “survival of the fittest”, was adapted to explain the development of human societies. Some European theorists, including the English philosopher Herbert Spencer, argued that successful individuals and races had competed better in the natural world and consequently evolved to higher states than did other less fit peoples. Reasoning along these lines, imperialists justified European domination of other peoples as the inevitable consequence of natural scientific principles. All these racist assumptions laid the foundation for a new, racially oriented view of humans and their civilisations. They believed that if men were seen to be markedly different from one another in physical racial traits, and if some cultures were regarded to be vastly superior to others, then it appeared to follow that the racial differences must have been caused by cultural superiority (Curtin, 1971:xv). At this time, many Europeans viewed themselves as the most advanced civilisation in the world, and some saw it as their mission to “enlighten” and “civilise” the rest of the world. Britain's

colonial empire, for example, was motivated partly by the idea that the white race was destined to rule and bring civilisation to the rest of the world, territories they regarded as inhabited by “backward” peoples. The belief that it was the ‘white man’s burden’ to civilise the rest of the world was enough reason to justify the European scramble for and partition of Africa. The English writer and poet, Rudyard Kipling (1864–1936), defined the “white man’s burden” in a poem he wrote in 1899, entitled *The White Man’s Burden*, as the duty of European and Euro-American peoples to bring order and enlightenment to distant lands (Kipling, 1911:215–217). French imperialists also often invoked the *mission civilisatrice*, that is, ‘the civilising mission’, as a justification for French expansion into Africa and other parts of the world. This idea increased support for the European occupation of Africa and Africa’s subjection to European rule and dictatorship.

Racial differences fortified European arrogance, and representatives of imperial and colonial powers most often foolishly adopted racist views on the basis of personal experience, which appeared to teach their assumed superiority to other peoples. Most European missionaries, travellers, administrators and soldiers, who claimed to have delved into the past of African societies, worked under the aegis of imperial governments and within a framework of Christian belief. The interpretations of their findings tended, accordingly, to reflect official and often racist attitudes. The belief that black Africans had certain intrinsic characteristics that naturally made them inferior to the white race came to be firmly instituted. Visiting the Mossi capital of Wagadugu in 1888, L.G. Binger, a French, remarked that “If the European should ever come here, he should come as master, constituting the high class of society, and should not have to bow his head before indigenous chiefs, to whom he is infinitely superior in all respects” (cited in Wilks, 1970:7).

Whether it is true that the African is the lowest human species or not, Europeans’ advances in support of Africans’ inferiority seems to suggest that in their views and images, they saw a close resemblance between Africans and animals. This argument rests on their belief that Africans’ “... mind ... is far nearer to the animal world than that of the European or Asiatic, and exhibits something of the animal’s placidity and want of desire to rise beyond the state he has reached ...” (Lugard, 1965:69).

Descendants of Apes

Having theorised that Africans were inferior to Europeans, they were savages, and the least of humans in the stages of evolution, European writers were only following a natural pattern when they likened Black Africans to beasts, and, fortunately for them, there was a beast in Africa which was likened to humans. In fact, some of the Europeans regarded Africans as equal to animals, as is clear from the following quotation.

When beasts – the leopards – killed some of us while we were working away in the forest and others got lost or died from exposure or starvation and we begged the white man to leave us alone, saying we could get no more rubber, but the white men and the soldiers said: Go. You are only beasts yourselves. You are only Nyama [meat].⁴

Josiah Clark Nott and G.R. Glidden in their study, *Indigenous Races of the Earth*, deliberately distorted facial and skull features to suggest a close relationship between

African peoples and chimpanzees (Bentley and Ziegler, 2003:959). Certain traditions in European literature helped to perpetuate the view that Africans shared certain features with apes, and for that matter descended from them. Some writers suggested that Negroes had descended from the generation of ape-kind or that apes were the offspring of Negroes and some unknown African beasts. The basis of this reasoning was the common and persistent notion that there sometimes occurred “a beastly copulation or conjuncture” between apes and Negroes, and particularly that apes were inclined wantonly to attack Negro women (Jordan, 1969:31). In 1699, Edward Tyson helped dispel the confusion arising from the resemblance of apes to Black peoples. In a scientific investigation, Tyson dissected a chimpanzee, and throughout the process, he meticulously compared the animal with human beings in every anatomical detail. His investigations established beyond question both the close relationship and the non-identity of apes and humans (Jordan, 1969:32). Tyson’s conclusions, however, could not weaken the vigorous tradition in European circles which linked blacks with apes in that as late as the 1730s, a well-travelled, intelligent naval surgeon, John Atkins, was not at all sure that the stories about Negroes and apes were false. He observed:

At some Places the *Negroes* have been suspected of Bestiality with them [apes and monkeys], and by the Boldness and Affection they are known under some Circumstances to express to our Females; the Ignorance and Stupidity on the one side, to guide or control Lust; but more from the near resemblances are sometimes met to the Human Species would tempt one to suspect the Fact (Jordan, 1969:31).

Libidinous Creatures

The resemblance between blacks and apes was sometimes cemented by another alleged resemblance between the two in the form of sexual promiscuity. Europeans believed that baboons were as lustful and venerous as goats because a baboon which had been “brought to the French king ... above all loved the companie [sic] of women, and young maidens; his genital member was greater than might match the quantity of his other parts.” Pictures of two varieties of apes, a “Satyre” and an “Ægopithecus,” graphically emphasized the “virile member” (Jordan, 1969:30). The section on apes in Edward Topsell’s *Historie of Foure-Footed Beastes* (1607), suggested that “Men that have low and flat nostrils are Libidinous as Apes that attempt women, and having thicke [sic] lippes [sic] the upper hanging over the neather, they are deemed fooles [sic], like the lips of Asses and Apes” (Jordan, 1969:29). The Black African and the ape now belonged to the same ‘family’ group in theory and practice, at least in certain respects. If this was the case, then it implied that what was a feature of the African was probably a characteristic of the ape. As Europeans associated Africans and their religion with the Devil so did they link apes to devils. In an attempt to distinguish between Satyre-apes and the mythical creatures of that name, Topsell explained that it was “probable, that Devils take not any dænomination [sic] or shape from Satyres, but rather the Apes themselves from Devils whome [sic] they resemble, for there are many things common to the Satyre-apes and the devilish Satyres” (Jordan, 1969:30). According to Jordan, the inner logic of this

association derived from uneasiness concerning the apes' "indecent likeness [sic] and imitation of man"; it revolved round evil and sexual sin' and, rather vaguely, it connected apes with blackness (Jordan, 1969:30). Meanwhile, by forging a sexual connection between Africans and apes, Europeans were able to give vent to their feeling that Africans were a lewd, lascivious, and wanton people.

Carnivorous, Savage, Primitive, and Barbaric People

After establishing a connection between the African and the ape, European reporters hastily concluded that Africans had a weaker brain which made them do things haphazardly and behave savagely, primitively and barbarically. In fact, some of them thought Africans were naturally wicked, and thus described them as "brutish" or "bestial" or "beastly". One observer related how Africans "... doe [sic] eate [sic]" each other "alive" in some places but dead in others "as we wolde [sic] befe [sic] or mutton" (Jordan, 1969:25). On entering Gabon for the first time, Christina Dodwell also appallingly reported about the country and its inhabitants thus:

Gabon was by far the most primitive country I visited. A different custom was that of a tribe we came across in southern Gabon: when one of their women gave birth to a male child, the father would go out into the forest, find someone of a neighbouring tribe, discover his name and then kill him. Certain parts of the body were eaten in a ceremony of baptism and that was how the child received his name. When cannibalism was declared illegal the chief protested and pointed out that without this ceremony the future generations of male children would not be entitled to have names. Tradition was not something which could be altered or replaced and cannibalism could not be stamped out by a mere law. It was their way of life, it was part of the forest, and it was not going to change. The eating of human flesh was often a privilege reserved for men only;⁵

In fact, Europeans held that so steep were Africans in savagery, primitiveness and barbarism that even in the eighteenth century, when the savages of the world were being promoted to "nobility" by Europeans as aid to self-scrutiny and reform at home, Africans were not customarily thought of as embodying all the qualities of the noble savage (Jordan, 1969:31). In one of the earliest attempts to dramatise the nobility of the savage African, Aphra Behn, in 1688, described her hero Oroonoko in terms which made clear the conditions under which Africans could be admitted as candidates of the 'civilised club:

White of 'em being like Snow, as were his Teeth. His nose rising and *Roman*, instead of *African* and flat: His Mouth the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turn'd Lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. The whole Proportion and Air of his Face was so nobly and exactly form'd, that bating his Colour, there could be

nothing in Nature more beautiful, agreeable and handsome (Jordan, 1969:28).

Heathenism

Reports of European travellers, explorers, adventurers, and other agents were also full of derogatory descriptions of the religion and religious life of Africans. Due to differences they observed between Christianity and the religion of Africans, they argued that Africans did not know God and, for that matter, were heathen. Without any thorough inquiry into the religious life of Africans, Lord Lugard could argue that

Through the ages the African has evolved no organised religious creed, and though some tribes appear to believe in a deity, the religious sense seldom rises above pantheistic animism, and seem more often to take the form of a vague dread of the supernatural. ... Belief in the power of the witch and wizard, and of the Juju-priest and witch-doctor, in charms and fetish, and in the ability of individuals to assume at will the form of wild beasts, are also common among many tribes (Lugard, 1965:69).

These descriptions were based on the form of xenophobia that happened to be fashioned out at the moment. African religion was mockingly described as primitive and superstitious. It is not true, however, that Africans were unreligious before the coming of the Europeans. Africans had their own unique forms of worship. African religion was, and still is, also certainly not superstitious; it was abominably complex, and anthropologists were usually baffled that African priests could carry so much esoteric doctrine in their memory (Howe, 1958:16). But as was clear from the alleged motives for the coming of the Europeans to Africa, Christianity was not a popular religion in Africa. Since Europeans believed that Christianity was the only true religion, its absence in many parts of Africa was, to them, indicative that the people worshipped the Devil. As Sir Harry Johnston well remarked,

Africa is the chief stronghold of the real Devil – the reactionary forces of Nature hostile to the uprise of Humanity. Here Beelzebub, King of Flies, marshals his vermiform and arthropod hosts – insects, ticks and nematode worms – which more than in other continents (excepting Negroid Asia) convey to the skin, veins, intestines, and spinal marrow of men and other vertebrates the microorganisms which cause deadly, disfiguring, or debilitating diseases, or themselves create the morbid condition of the persecuted human being, beasts, bird, reptile, frog, or fish (Johnston, 1910:14–15).

One of the earliest English accounts also described Africans as “a people of beastly living, without a God, lawe [sic], religion or commonwealth” (Jordan, 1969:24). European reporters sometimes went to the extent of associating the so-called African

heathenism explicitly with barbarity and blackness. Already they had in hand the *devil* as a mediating term among these impinging concepts. As one Englishman observed, “Negroes “in colour so in condition are little other than Devils incarnate,” and further, “the Devil ... has infused prodigious Idolatry into their hearts, enough to relish his pallat and aggrandize their tortures when he gets power to fry their souls, as the raging Sun has already scorcht [sic] their cole-black carcasses” (Jordan, 1969:24). African religions were not, and still are not, idolatry worship or nature worship as European reporters and writers described them. A critical and careful examination of African religions show unmistakably that the religion is closely related to Judaism. Yet, partly due to ignorance and partly due to the desire to satisfy their colonial ambitions, they had to perpetuate falsehood about the strongholds of African existence. In view of this, Mission societies, which had appeared in all denominations and in all European countries in the nineteenth century, claimed it was their divine mission to convert the rest of the world; to save others from what they saw to be *barbarism* and *savagery*. More importantly, not only did they derogatorily describe African religion but they also tended to regard the defects of true religion as an aspect of the African condition. Viewed critically, heathenism, then, was for Europeans one of the characteristics of savage peoples. It was no wonder that these unscrupulous and self-styled historians regarded Africa as a dark continent, drenched in ignorance and incapable of any achievements.

Lack of Civilisation

Describing Africa as a “Dark Continent”, devoid of any attributes of civilisation before the contact with Europe in the fifteenth century also featured prominently in European historical writings about the African past. Many of them, including David Hume, genuinely believed and propounded the view that “No ingenious manufactures ... no arts, no science,” could be found among Africans.⁶ While Trollope advanced that the African had made “No approach to the civilisation of his white fellow creatures whom he imitates as a monkey does a man”, a former Governor of Nigeria held that “for countless centuries, while all the pageant of history swept by, the African remained unmoved – in primitive savagery”.⁷ Lord Lugard also added that “... in Western Africa ... or any other part of tropical Africa, from the frontiers of Egypt to the Zambezi, there are no traces of antecedent civilisations – no monuments or buried cities – like those of the prehistoric civilisations of Asia and South America” and “Unlike the ancient civilizations of Asia and South America, the former inhabitants of Africa have left no monuments and no records other than rude drawings on rocks like those of Neolithic man.”⁸

So shockingly, Margery Perham, an English scholar who had carried out researches into the African past and should have known better, subscribed to these views in 1951. She wrote that ““until the very recent penetration by Europe the greater part of the continent was without the wheel, the plough and the transport animal; almost without stone houses or clothes except skins; without writing and so without history””⁹ In a lecture she delivered in 1961 and published in 1964, Perham further challenged the view that “... the force ...” which “... swept the rule of Europe out of almost the whole of tropical Africa and ... bred ... new nations in its place ...” hardly qualified to be labelled as ‘nationalism’. Her argument was that the elements of nationalism included “... the common possession of territory, history, customs, language, religion and, at least in large measure, environment and way of life.” But to Perham, “The astonishing fact is that

nearly all the new African nations lacked *all* these elements except a common territory, and even that has been lately and arbitrarily demarcated by alien power” (Perham, 1964:26–27). The substance of Perham’s argument was that, as Africans had never had any of these elements, they had never had a civilisation because these are some of the fundamental characteristics of culture and civilisation, and so their lack on the part of Africans was tantamount to the Africans’ lack of culture and civilisation.

The general belief in European circles was that Negroid Africans, as inferior and uncivilised as they were believed to be, “were “children who had still to grow up: ... they were manifestly in need of government by ... [their ‘Caucasian’ superiors] who had grown up” (Davidson, 1970:20; see also Freund, 1984:86). There was, therefore, the argument that European domination of Africa, a phenomenon that came into reality at the cost of many African lives, was an unqualified blessing for the continent. In 1883, Sir Bartle Frere, reporting on his interaction with King Leopold II, for instance, stated: ““He [King Leopold] first explained his views to me when I was his guest in Brussels some years ago ... his designs are most philanthropic and are among the few schemes of the kind ... free from any selfish commercial or political object”” (Pakenham, 1991:11). After demonising the pre-colonial African scene and wanting to legitimise British domination of Africa, Lord Lugard argued that

It was the task of civilisation to put an end to slavery, to establish Courts of Law, to inculcate in the natives a sense of individual responsibility, of liberty, and of justice, and to teach their rulers how to apply these principles” (1965:5).

Rather than see domination from the African point of view, Lugard confidently felt that

“... the verdict of history will award high praise to the efforts and achievements of Great Britain in the discharge of these great responsibilities. For, in my belief, under no other rule – be it of his own uncontrolled potentates, or of aliens – does the African enjoy such a measure of freedom and of impartial justice, or a more sympathetic treatment, and for that reason I am a profound believer in the British Empire and its mission in Africa.” (1965:5)

Consequently, most colonial administrators adopted certain attitudes towards Africans which seemed to show that Africans were more fortunate to be placed under their benevolent domination. Generally, in the colonial era, whether the system of administration was direct or indirect, and whether assimilation was or was not a specifically developed policy in the educational and judicial spheres, the Europeans in Africa, administrators or traders, missionaries or educators, shared one basic assumption. They believed that Western cultural values were inherently superior to any they found on the African continent. They viewed themselves as the possessors of racially and culturally superior ideas and behaviour patterns, from which the Negro was ‘tapping’ the benefits of civilisation, rather than as economic exploiters. In view of their technological

and material advancement, it became customary for Europeans to argue that either Africans were incapable of entering upon the path of progress embarked on in Europe, or that they would, certainly, take a very long time to reach the European level. It was, further, felt that by the time the Africans had reached as far as Europeans had then attained, the latter, progressing with ever-increasing momentum, would have gone even further ahead. It was, thus, thought to be not only for their own benefit that Europeans should colonise Africa, but for the benefit of both the Africans and of the world at large, or else the resources of the continent would never be properly developed (Fage, 1969:6).

Generally, as Crowther shows, “without us they would be back in the trees” was the philosophy of most Europeans in Africa during the colonial period (Crowder, 1968:11). Consequently, when numerous rebellions broke out in various parts of Africa against the imposition of European colonial domination, Europeans described them as attempts to take Africa backward into her alleged former barbaric state in which she was engulfed. The Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya, for instance, was not seen as a genuine nationalist movement, based on genuine grievances. *The Historical Survey of the Origins of the Mau Mau* or the Corfield Report” (1960), the official account of the revolt published by the colonial government, portrayed the insurrection as backward-looking and ‘tribal’ (Mazrui and Tidy, 1984:60). Other European observers also saw it as a reversionary and barbarous movement aimed at turning Kenya into a land of “darkness and death” (Crowder, 1968:11).

Without History

If these uprisings against European rule in Africa were geared towards taking Africa back into the period of darkness in which it was entangled, then it obviously implied that African history, before the advent of the Europeans, was just a ‘library’ or ‘recordful’ of atrocities between and among the various peoples. It again meant that European domination was for the good of the Africans and a burden for the Europeans as they had the onus of ‘civilising’ the ‘never civilised’ Africans into ‘civilised’ beings. But how could the civilisers carry out their ‘divine responsibility’ of ‘curing’ the uncivilised Africans of their dangerous ‘uncivilisity’ disease? Clearly, looking at the stance which the self-styled civilised Europeans took, and the responsibility they unilaterally assumed for themselves, the relationship between the European ‘civilisers’ and the African ‘civilisees’ could parallel that between the medical doctor and the patient. The physician arrives at a diagnosis after asking for or going into the patient’s history – previous illnesses and those of the parents or related members. The civilisers, therefore, had to go into the history of the civilisees in order to diagnose a cure for the ‘uncivilisity’ of the Africans. This exercise would not only help the European medicinemen to apply the appropriate civilising techniques but also enable them to even know more about the roots of the African sickness. It was at this point that the European civilising herbalists found their obligation the more burdensome and problematic as they came to the realisation that the Africans had *no history* from which any knowledge about the Africans could be obtained to assist in the curing process. It was, indeed, a ‘problematic problem’!

As if denying Africa of civilisation was not enough, European writers went further to deprive Africa of having any past, not even one to entertain her children, let alone a glorious one. They viewed Africa as a historically backward continent. They sometimes explained this backwardness in terms of decadent and barbaric customs, but

most often in terms of material culture. It is very difficult to point out the exact parameters they used to measure the unhistoricity of Africa before their advent on the continent. This is because for one to claim that he is coming to correct a situation implies that a mistake has already been committed. Then the atrocious lifestyle of the African which the Europeans now knew was embedded in the past, the history, of the Africans. Yet the same Africans, with an unwholesome past, did not have a past. What a paradox! Writing was the yardstick. In fact, 'without writing and so without history' was the theme of colonial historiography (Wallerstein, 1961:11) Colonial writers, consequently, conceptualised history in Africa as the history of its invaders: Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Persians, Indians, Indonesians, and lastly Europeans. Hegel, for instance, held this rather inimical view in the nineteenth century. In his lectures on philosophy of history, he advanced the view that Africa 'is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit' (cited in Wilks, 1970:7) He went further to argue that "...what we properly understand by Africa is the unhistorical underdeveloped spirit still on the threshold of world history". Sir Reginald Coupland and Professor A.P. Newton were also of the same view.

Africa was generally considered a wholly pre-literate society until the contact with Europe and, therefore, had no history. In *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*, Lord Lugard begins his introduction with the assertion that "Africa has been justly termed "the Dark Continent," for the secrets of its peoples, its tales, and mountains and rivers, have remained undiscovered not merely to modern civilisation, but through all the ages of which history has any record" (1965:1). By this, Lugard meant that Africa had, until contact with Europe, never come to the limelight of history. The highest extent he could go in crediting Africans with a past was to state that

The history of these peoples of tropical Africa, except on the coast fringe, has during the ages prior to the advent of European explorers some sixty years ago been an impenetrable mystery. Attempts to solve it consist chiefly in conjectural migrations of tribes and mythical legends, except in so far as the history of West African empires of Ghana, Melle, and Songhay have been recorded by the Arabic historians of the Moorish Empire (1965:66).

In their study, *Introduction to the Study of History*, the two French historians, Charles Langlois and Charles Seignobos, also expressed the view that "no document no history" (Langlois and Seignobos, 1898:17), and by 'document', they meant written records. Surprisingly, as late as 1963, by which time one would expect that Europeans should have dispossessed themselves of such erroneous impressions, the Regius Professor of History in the University of Oxford, Trevor-Roper, revived this view about Africa. He asserted that "perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at the present there is none; there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness ... and darkness is not the subject of history" (cited in Crowder, 1968:10). "There is", the Professor added, "only the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe; tribes whose chief function in history, in my opinion, is to show to the present an image of the past from which by

history it has escaped” (Wilks, 1970:7) R. Cornevin, in his two-volume study, *Histoire de l’Afrique*, also argued, rather specifically, that “... central equatorial Africa ... could be called the ahistorical region of black Africa, for no important state developed there.”¹⁰ At this point, the histories, civilisations and achievements of the peoples and states of ancient Egypt, Axum, the Nilotic Sudan, the Berbers of North Africa, the Bantu, the Swahili of the East African coast, the Western Sudanese empires of Ghana, Mali, Songhai, and those of Asante, Dahomey, Oyo, Benin, Kanem-Bornu, the Hausa states of present-day Northern Nigeria, the Vai, etc., remained unknown or were conveniently forgotten.

As ‘Africa has no history’ remained a cardinal premise of colonial rule, the only aspect of African history taught in the schools of the colonial period was the history of the colonial era. Pupils and students were forced to learn about the names of monarchs, conquerors, places, mountains, rivers, etc. in Europe. In essence, it was European history that Africans studied in schools in Africa. A notorious textbook used by French African school children ridiculously began: *Our ancestors the Gauls* (Wallerstein, 1961:124). Thus, while the African child remained physically in Africa, he was psychologically removed from his natural environment and placed in an alien context, making him unsuitable for both Africa and Europe as he was not a ‘fully-grown member’ of either cultures.¹¹ Inasmuch as Africa was unhistorical to Western writers, neither European nor any other universities had chairs for African history or trainees specialising in African history. It was only North Africa that was credited with a certain historical past. Even so, that region was treated as part of the Mediterranean world, and the Arab role in its history quite often minimised. As for sub-Saharan Africa, the home of the black African, since it was believed there were no written records and since the Negro was thought incapable of any higher cultural achievement, it was considered highly inconceivable to apply the term history to the story of the static savage cultures.

There is no wonder that the so-called histories of Africa produced by Western writers were devoid of African images, making the indigenous people of the continent appear radically passive. As we have already observed, colonial writers saw virtually all events in their narratives through the spectacles of European agents in Africa. They made the mistake of equating the history of the colonisers with that of the colonised peoples of Africa, and assumed that since the peoples of tropical Africa were generally non-literate, the history of the area could be written only from the record of the literate foreigners who penetrated, conquered and partitioned it among themselves. As Afigbo acknowledges, with the period of European dominance, there was clearer evidence of some interest in the sequence and processes of change over time, as well as in rational causation and consequences. With this period, European writers appear to have been set on the proper path of historical writing. However, what most interested European writers during this period were European activities in Africa rather than the activities of the Africans themselves. Issues that attracted their attention were a history of trade and diplomacy, and invasion and conquest, heavily infused with assumptions about racial superiority that buttressed colonial domination. For the period following conquest, colonial writing focused on the progress of administrative structures, transport network and business enterprise in a heroic spirit. J.E. Flint (1966:129), for example, in his twenty-paged article, “Chartered Companies and the Scramble for Africa”, examined his subject matter virtually without a mention of Africa as having anything to do with the event. He was not

ashamed to state explicitly in his conclusion that “It has been possible to tell this story almost without reference to the African peoples involved or their rulers, because their wishes hardly countered” (p. 129). Of course, no African representative was invited to the Berlin Conference, and the wishes of the people were not taken into consideration before handing them over to the tyrannical rule of Europe; but it was wrong to assume that their wishes never countered.

In his *A History of the Gold Coast and Ashanti*, Claridge was also caught up in the same web in both volumes of his work. The title of the book at first sight creates the impression that the two volumes were stuffed with the history of the Gold Coast proper and Asante and the intercourse between the peoples of the two territories. A critical examination of the work, however, palpably shows that the work is not in the least about the history of the Gold Coast and Asante, but largely about the history of European dealings with the Gold Coast and Asante. Moreover, he compiled the study throughout from the European standpoint of a European spectator and took little account of the doings of the different African peoples except where they impinged on European interest. In fact, very little space was devoted to purely African affairs. Volume one has a short opening chapter of only seven and a half pages on African (Akan) origins. Chapters II to VI deal with the European voyages, ancient discoveries of the Europeans, building of forts and castles, settlement, and conflicts among the various European groups on the littoral regions of the Ghana. Chapter VII is concerned with tribal wars between the indigenous peoples themselves, but even here, there were traces of European activities to a large extent, while Chapter VIII is devoted to the Dutch-Komenda War of 1694–1699. Chapters IX, X and XI introduce readers to the Asante Question: how Asante emerged overlord over the southern states and peoples and her claims to ownership of the territories of these peoples and the peoples themselves as her vassals by virtue of her conquest of those states and peoples. The rest of the first volume, from Chapters XII to XXXIII, deals in the main with European activities and contacts with the local peoples in the Gold Coast. All the twenty-seven chapters of the second volume are more or less devoted to Anglo-Asante relations as from 1873. Three chapters, XIII, XIV and XV, deal in the main with Asante affairs, but here there is the impression that the author was not listening to the oratory in the Great Council in Kumasi but was watching the events with an anxious eye from the Government House in Cape Coast.

In view of the preoccupations of the colonial writers, it is logical to argue that they did not have the peoples of Africa and their relations and activities as their subject matter but rather the Europeans and their activities in Africa. It is further argued that most titles of books produced by the colonial historians were wrongly chosen as, in most cases, there were great differences between the titles and the contents of the books.

Hamitic Origins of African Achievements

Common sense showed that it was inconceivable for a people who, it was believed, were incapable of initiating or inventing anything on their own to possess elements associated only with ‘civilised’ people. “He that will lie well must have a good remembrance, that he agree [sic] in all points with himself, lest he be spied” (cited in Simpson and Speake, 1998:159). Apparently in line with this maxim, the colonial writers quickly realised that the fraudulence of their assertions would be unearthed if they did not offer any explanation for the existence of sophisticated states among black Africans whom they

had painted in the eyes of the world as a people lacking consciousness and all senses of agility. To eschew accounting for the inconsistency, all change and movement in African societies before the advent of the Europeans were given a mono-causal explanation in the phoney Hamitic hypothesis. The dark complexion of Negroes had been given a scriptural interpretation, postulating that Negroes were dark because they descended from Ham, “the world-darkener”. Strangely enough, when it came to achievements, the Negroes ceased to be the direct descendants of Ham, because this time round, the Hamites were white. Now, the biblical Ham, whom God cursed, became the ancestor of whites, inasmuch as the Hamitic theory at this time assumed that the African Hamites were ‘whites’ like Europeans, and that they and their culture were naturally superior to the Negroes and their culture. Apart from skin complexion occupational specialisation such as pastoralism, language and religion, precisely Islam, physical height, skull measurement and hair texture were sometimes used to define the Hamites. Whoever the Hamites were appeared to be of little concern. What was important to the Eurocentric historians was that apart from the relatively late Semitic influence, the coming into Africa of the Hamites was responsible for the transition of African societies from savagery through barbarism to the threshold of civilisation so that wherever Negro people had made an outstanding achievement, the explanation must be sought in ‘Hamitic’ influence or infiltration.

Consequently, much prominence was given to stories of foreign heroes who came from outside Africa and with their magic swords, or their mandate from the god of the sky, or supernatural powers otherwise derived, imposed themselves and their descendants on a previously unorganised indigenous people, creating new allegiances among them and mustering them into new communities in the form of states (Kwanashie et al., 1987:59). Writing in 1930, the anthropologist C.G. Seligman argued that “... the civilisations of Africa are the civilisations of the Hamites, its history the record of these peoples and of their interactions with the other two African stocks, the Negro and the Bushman ...” (cited in McCall, 1969:136).¹² Seligman in fact leaves a general impression of the wave after wave of incoming Hamitic pastoralists, ‘better armed as well as quicker witted than the dark agricultural Negroes’, imposing themselves on the Negroes, mixing with them, and stimulating them into political and economic advancement. Lord Hailey has also asserted that “the Hamitic conquests which gave rise to the Lacustrine kingdoms of East Africa have their parallels in the penetration of West Africa by invaders from the north” (Hailey, 1938:28). Regarding the formation of the Hausa states in Northern Nigeria, H.A.S. Johnston argued in 1967 that

... at some period a considerable number of Berbers crossed the Sahara, settled among these people (the Negroes), and intermarried with them. ... Indirect though all this evidence is, there seems to be a strong probability that the crucial period of ethnic alchemy ... was to produce the Hausa people and the Hausa language While the language was evolving, the Hausa city-states began to emerge as separate powers¹³

In 1963, in *A Short History of Africa*, while accepting the view that the idea of divine monarchy was a creation of the Negroes themselves, Roland Oliver and J.D. Fage also generally attributes the genius behind the rise of the Sudanese states like ancient Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Oyo and Benin to Egypt (Crowder, 1968:12). Later in 1969, Fage, again, while doubting the authenticity of the theory submitted that "... in at least two aspects, the Hamitic hypothesis was not altogether as absurd an interpretation of the African past as we may now be inclined to think" (1969:6). He argues, first, that in terms of commonalities in agricultural activities and the concept of divine kingship between the ancient Egyptians, who spoke a 'Hamitic' language, and many Negro African kingdoms, "... it is tempting to conclude, as many good historians still do, that it [that is, the idea of divine kingship] must have spread throughout Africa from this Egyptian and 'Hamitic source (Fage, 1969:8). He observes again that where,

... the pastoralists ... such as the Tuareg tribes of the 'Hamitic'-speaking Berber peoples, competed for land and water with the Negro agriculturalists, the northerners did have certain military qualities, such as the mobility afforded by their horses and camels, or the close knit kingship discipline needed to enable their tribes to survive the hardships of desert life, which permitted them to infiltrate and defeat the Negroes" (1969:8).

These scholars created the impression that the Hamites invaded North-East Africa probably a good deal more than 4000 or 5000 B.C. The principal Hamites-or Hamitic negroid- tribes in East Africa, according to Lugard, are "... the Abyssinians, the Somalis, the Gallas, the Masai, the Wahima, and the Nandi; in West Africa the Fulani, supposed to be descended from the Berbers" (1965:67). Writings based on such theories described the conquered Negroid peoples as "backward" and, therefore, unfit for survival unless colonists 'civilised' them to live and act as Europeans did. The African was thought of being incapable of doing anything on his own and thus any achievement of the African was believed to have been the result of the impact of the Hamites.

The non-existence of Negro achievements was very fundamental to colonial ideology, which sought to attribute all signs of human accomplishments to invaders from outside Africa and never to black Africans. They were able to maintain this image of Africa by systematically refusing to believe that the archaeological finds, the works of arts discovered, and the travellers' accounts of ancient empires were the products of a black civilisation. Many of them appeared to reach out deliberately for improbable explanations of obvious situations in order to maintain the myths which they so profoundly believed. Even some of the anthropologists among them who could have been more sympathetic to the reality of African achievements, tended rather to search for primitive purity, which would deny any higher achievement on the part of Africans (Wallerstein, 1961:125). In view of this, a wandering Roman sculptor was postulated to be the creator of the Ife bronze (Crowder, 1968:12). In 1895 also, a European, challenging the African origins of the ruins of the Zimbabwean civilisation, remarked that, "It is a well-accepted fact that the negroid brain never could be capable of taking the initiative in work of such intricate nature" (Wallerstein, 1961:125).

As Ward observes, this persistent legend of African incapacity was an article of faith with many Europeans up to the end of the colonial period. Europeans believed strongly that Africans had not the character to hold down a responsible job. They would need constant supervision by Europeans. In line with this belief, it became extremely difficult persuading the government public works department in Ghana, for example, to take the first one of the civil engineering students of the University College of the Gold Coast (now University of Ghana) and give him some practical experience when the department was building a suspension bridge to carry the main Accra-Takoradi road across the Pra river (Ward, 1991:173). To the chiefs of the department, it was self-evident that an African in a senior post could be no more than a supernumerary. “You might give him some calculations to work out, or some stresses to measure; but he would get things wrong and a European would have to do the work again after him” (Ward, 1991:173). Thus, Africans trained as engineers could find no job as it would be considered unheard of to have an African engineer supervise a European foreman. As chief Awolowo of Nigeria stated in 1946, “Only a few parents so far have had the courage to send their sons abroad to study engineering”, because “African engineers did not succeed in getting jobs under the Government of Native Administration” (Wallerstein, 1961:47). Those trained as lawyers knew that they could not become judges, particularly in white settler regions. In fact, at whatever level of skill, Africans had to curb their ambitions because of their assumed incapacity. This false theory of African inability was sometimes supported by questionable scientific evidence. For example, it was stated that the skull of an African infant closed over earlier than that of a European, thus rendering further enlargement of the brain impossible: and that the African cranial capacity was on the average measurably smaller than the European, additional impressiveness being given to this statement by a figure of two places of decimals (Ward, 1991:174). As a matter of administrative convenience, therefore, it was assumed that an African employee in any field must always be an assistant to a European, never the other way round (Ward, 1991:248).

Despotic and Barbaric Rulers

Added to the impressions European colonial writers created about black Africa was the view that African rulers were despotic and barbaric. Of course, European incursions into the interior regions of Africa were met with stiff resistance from some of the well developed states and kingdoms. This resistance attracted European antagonism, usually expressed in prejudiced attitudes towards certain African institutions and groups among the African populations, particularly those rulers who attempted to beat back European domination. This derived from the fact that the colonial writers were bent on finding justification for European domination of Africa and so any peoples who stood to resist colonial rule became the object of European *literary crucifixion*. Those African leaders who led the wars of resistance were “portrayed variously as wrong-headed and obscurantist slave dealers, or addicts to human sacrifice and cannibalism who tried to obstruct British [and all other imperial powers’] torch-bearers of civilisation” (Afigbo, 1965:421). Many African rulers, including the Mandingo chief Samore Toure, the Zulu King Chaka, the Mad Mullah of Somalia, and the Abd-el-Kader of Algeria, were all treated in colonial textbooks with disdain, described as barbarians and cruel warriors, whose conquest or defeat was the beginning of progress (Wallerstein, 1961:122). The failure of Africans in their resistance to the imposition of colonial rule was, thus,

explained in terms of the tyranny of their rulers. West African rulers such as Prempeh of Asante and Jaja of the Niger Delta (Opobo), Atta Hiru, the Sultan of Sokoto, and Ovonramwen, the Oba of Benin, were claimed to be so tyrannical to their subjects that their subjects were glad to see them go. Thomas Pakenham described Cetshwayo, King of the Zulu, as “a bloodthirsty tyrant and ... an ignorant savage” (Pakenham, 1991:53).

To show the cruelty of the African leaders, European writers created the impression that the subjects of the African rulers were glad to see their lands taken over by foreign invaders. Melmoth Osborn, Secretary of a special British mission to Pretoria, in proclaiming the British take-over of the Transvaal in 1877 stated: “... And whereas I have satisfied by the numerous addresses, ceremonials and letters... that a large proportion of the inhabitants of the Transvaal see ... the ruined condition of the country and therefore earnestly desire the establishment within and over it of Her Majesty’s authority and rule ...” (Pakenham, 1991:40). Also writing about Sudan in a letter dated April 11, 1876 to the British government, Colonel Charles Gordon, Governor of Equatorial Guinea, declared that “For a foreign Power to take this country [Sudan] would be most easy. The mass are far from fanatical. They would rejoice in a good government, let its religion be what it might. ... it is the [Egyptian] government that needs civilising far more than the people” (Pakenham, 1991:53). In some cases, the picture they painted seemed to show that some of the African leaders were themselves happy to lose their sovereignty to foreign powers. Cetshwayo, King of the Zulu, reportedly remarked: “I am glad to know the Transvaal is English ground; perhaps now there may be rest” (Pakenham, 1991:40).

A Divided Continent

Apart from the wrong descriptions about the African peoples themselves, Africa itself was put in a considerably wrong frame in the works of European writers. The historical partition of Africa, “almost as clear-cut and permanent as the political partition of the continent in the nineteenth century” is what Afigbo sees to be the most prominent distortion of Africa in European quarters (1993:42). Dei-Anang (1964:11) is not wrong in stressing that geographically, Africa is the most compact of the land masses. The rivers and lakes in Africa, starting with the Nile in the east to the Senegal River in the extreme west through the great lakes of Central Africa, the Congo River, Lake Chad and the Niger River emphasised Africa’s natural unity and provided a network of routes showing the way in which intercourse and inter-human relationships developed between and among Africans in the past. However, the detractors of Africa, the European writers, went to great lengths to prove that the north was different from the south. They destroyed the unity of Africa by introducing two types of partition. The first, as Dei-Anang points out, was a horizontal partition in which an almost water-tight demarcation was created between Africa north and south of the Sahara desert, and claiming that the north was neither culturally nor historically part of Africa (1964:12). The second was a vertical partition which secured for various imperial powers special ‘spheres of influence’ (Dei-Anang, 1964:12). The north was said to have belonged to the Graeco-Roman civilisation and the Semitic civilisation of the Fertile Crescent, two civilisations from which Africa south of the Sahara was believed to have been very effectively shielded. For instance, L. Dudley Stamp, in giving highlights on the African continent, asserts in his work, entitled *Africa: A Study in Tropical Development*, that “... the African continent has never been a

unit". Professor Walter Fitzgerald, writing in 1934, also added that "North Africa was viewed solely from the standpoint of its significance as the southern rim of the Mediterranean world, and there was some justification for this conception, though with equal reason the Barbary lands, Islamic culture, might have been considered a western prolongation of semitic Asia" (Fitzgerald, 1934:75). Margery Perham, in her *The Colonial Reckoning*, also regarded the northern fringes of Africa as the southern shore of Europe (1961:29).

Even Africa south of the Sahara was further partitioned into the littoral and interior regions: those which came earlier under the influence of foreign domination, and by so doing passively entered history, and those which were not directly affected by alien civilisation until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Afigbo, 1993:42). Relating to the coastal regions, three segments were identified. First in time and rank was the East African coast. From about 500 B.C., there grew up, across the wide waters of the Indian Ocean, a community of traders which included many coastal peoples. Trade contacts were thus established between the people of the East African coast and Arabia and India (Davidson, et al., 1968:35). The impact of foreign influence on the East Africans did not become pronounce at this time. It was from C.E. 700 that this region came more and more into contact with the civilisations of the Arabian and Persian Gulfs, then with India and China, and lastly, in the fifteenth century, with Europe (Davidson, et al., 1968:36). From this time, so strong was foreign impact on the East Africans that it came to be believed that until after the nineteenth century, the history of the region belonged more to the history of the Indian Ocean than to African history (Afigbo, 1993:42). The second segment was the western and central Sudan, which were treated as the southern coast of the Sahara desert. These areas started to come within the orbit of Muslim civilisations of North Africa and the Middle East as from the tenth century, and, thus, came to be part of history. The last segment, the West African coast, came under the influence of Western civilisation from about the fifteenth century C.E. following the exploratory activities of the Portuguese. Thus, while appreciating that Africa was geographically one continent, many European writers historically perceived Africa as made up of segments loosely joined together.

The 'Snatch' of Egypt

Closely paralleling the historical and geographical partition of Africa into segments of unequal historical significance was the unanimous assumption on the part of Eurocentric scholars, particularly in the nineteenth century, that ancient Egypt was not part of Africa. Its history, culture and civilisation were separated from those of the other inhabitants of the continent. The fact of the black complexion of the ancient Egyptians was accepted in Europe during the Renaissance. Though some writers argue that it was after 1830 that Eurocentric scholars began to dispute the 'Africanness' of the ancient Egyptian civilisation and the colour of its builders, others opine that this condition started in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with the beginning of the slave trade and the system of colonialism. Irrespective of when it started, it is a fact that it was after 1830, that is, after the Champollion's deciphering of the *Medu Netcher* and the publication of Dominic Vivant Denon's *Description of Egypt*, that a vigorous attempt was made to take Egypt out of Africa. The German philosopher, Georg Hegel, for instance, sought to take Egypt out of Africa and black-skinned Africans out of Egypt in the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries (Hegel, 1982:3). Arnold Toynbee, in his *A Study of History*, also stated categorically that the Egyptian civilisation was 'white' or European (Du Bois, 1965:99). Werner Keller has also argued that "... in the "Fertile Crescent" and in Egypt ... cultures and highly developed civilisations jostled each other in colourful and bewildering array", while over China, over the vast steppes of Russia, over Africa, darkness reigned supreme" (Keller, 1957:27-28). From the construction, we get a clear picture that to Keller, Egypt was not part of Africa, where, to him, darkness was reigning. Writing in 1957, J. Simmons added to the number when he claimed that "The story of the exploration of Africa by Europeans divides itself naturally into five phases. The first of these includes the discoveries made by Egyptian, Greek and Roman pioneers ..." (Perham and Simmons, 1957:23-24). By this statement, Simmons implied that the Egyptians were Europeans and not Africans, because in the first place he was examining explorations of Africa made by Europeans. Secondly, if he regarded the ancient Egyptians as Africans he would not have stated that they discovered Africa, a continent on which they also were, and still are, inhabitants.

In arguing that Egypt was not part of Africa, European writers obviously implied that Egypt belonged to or formed part of a different continent. The precise geographical location of Egypt, however, became, to these European 'claimants', a hard nut to crack. Some argued that Egypt was in reality Asiatic, while others asserted that it was European. J. Gardner Wilkinson, in his study, *The Ancient Egyptians*, first published in 1836 and re-issued in 1994, averred that the Egyptians were "undoubtedly from Asia; as is proved by the form of the skull, which is that of a Caucasian race, by their features, hair, and other evidences; and the whole valley of the Nile throughout Ethiopia, all Abyssinia, and the coast to the south, were peopled by Asiatic immigrations" (1994:302). In an extended discussion of the origin of these creators of the ancient monuments along the Nile, Wilkinson goes on to explain that "The Egyptians probably came to the Valley of the Nile as conquerors. Their advance was through Lower Egypt southwards; and the extraordinary notion that they descended, and derived their civilisation from Ethiopia has long since been exploded" (1994:303). The position advanced by Wilkinson became the reigning opinion of Eurocentric scholars for more than a century and influenced other white scholars. In *Histoire ancienne des peuples de l'Orient*, Gaston Maspero declared that "On examining innumerable reproductions of statues and bas-reliefs, we recognized at once that the people represented on the monuments instead of presenting peculiarities and the general appearance of the Negro, really resembled the fine white races of Europe and Western Asia (1917:17-18). Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. used a quote from a letter to him by Miriam Lichtheim to defend his position that the ancient Egyptians were not black people. Lichtheim, according to Schlesinger, went so far as to emphasise that "The Egyptians were not Nubians, and the original Nubians were not black. Nubia gradually became black because black peoples migrated northward out of Central Africa" (1992:130). As recent as 1971, David O'Connor wrote that "Thousands of sculpted and painted representations from Egypt and hundreds of well-preserved bodies from its cemeteries show that the typical physical type was neither Negroid nor Negro" (1971:2)

When they found themselves stuck in a quagmire, these Eurocentric writers sought refuge in linguistics, by distorting the meaning of ancient Egyptian words, in order to support their untenable stances. Though from all intent the ancient Egyptian word "kmt" or "Kemet" means literally "The Black Nation" or "The Black City",

Eurocentric scholars arbitrarily interpreted it to mean “the Black Land.” They argued that the word “kmt” could not have meant ‘black people’ or ‘black nation’ because the Egyptians were making a comment about the blackness of the soil and not about their colour. Here, they simply refused to believe that the people were describing themselves and their nation. To them, Africa, after all, was unhistorical, and, clearly, the Egyptians could not have been describing their land by reference to themselves.

Conclusion

Generally, the impressions above constituted some of the main European assumptions about Africa, especially the sub-Saharan part, and its inhabitants. It is, however, not true that Africans were primitive and barbaric, without civilisation and history, as they were portrayed in European circles. Indisputably, at this time, the colonial historians were not naturally concerned about the reality of the African past, present, and future. Their major ‘responsibility’ was to explain, rationalise and approve of European domination and manhandling of Africa. The insufficiency of their knowledge, and the ultimate ‘responsibility’ assigned them influenced their treatment and conceptualisation of the African past and their use of data from the past.

In fact, there are no peoples without a sense of history. Human history, of course, began to be enacted with the appearance of the first humans on earth, and since Africa has been proven to be the origins of the human species, human history took its roots from Africa. It is, therefore, wholly wrong to argue that Africa had no history until her contact with the invaders of the continent. Moreover, Africans have always had rich cultures and civilisations whose past are worthy of reconstruction and study. There is enough historical evidence to support this argument. This argument would be better substantiated if the African past is examined within the context of the cultural evolution their and the features of civilisation as used in historical studies.

Meanwhile, it is significant to note that these erroneous ideas, so firmly accepted in many quarters, tended to create the impression that everything African was necessarily evil, and must be replaced in indecent swiftness. The African was himself indoctrinated through Christianisation and western education and turned against himself. Eventually, the African came to see even his personality as evil, and everything European and the European as better and superior to himself respectively. This state of affairs not only tended to arrest the growth of the African continent, but also introduced the products of these harmful ideas, which were, and have remained, very detrimental to the development of Africa.

Notes

1. The term *European writers*, as used in this study, is used interchangeably with the term *colonial historians*. Where the term *colonial historians* is used, it also refers to the same European writers. The two terms are commonly used in reference to those European writers whose studies on Africa appeared just before the outbreak of the Second World War. They are characterised as colonial history since works within the colonial phase were done predominantly by colonial administrators and their collaborators. In this study, however, the two terms are used to refer to any European writers whose studies do not give a true picture about the African past, irrespective of when the work was published.

2. It must be noted that when Europeans in particular and outsiders in general spoke of Africans, they referred particularly to the Blacks who inhabited tropical Africa.
3. This poem appeared in a work entitled “The First Voyage of Robert Baker to Guinie ... 1562,” in Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation ...* (London, 1589), 132; It is cited in Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro, 1550 – 1812* (Baltimore: Penguin Books Inc., 1969), pp. 4–5.
4. This quotation is a testimony of Congo villagers interviewed by Consul Casement, in 1893. It is cited in Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: 1876–1912* (London: Abacus, 1991), p. 585.
5. Christina Dodwell made this statement in her *Travels with Fortune: An African Adventure* (London: W.H. Allen, 1979). This quotation is cited in Jacqueline-Bethel Mougoué, “Big Buttocks and Sultry Behaviour: Perceptions of Post-Colonial African Women in British Women’s Travel Narratives”. In K. Adu-Boahen, ed., *Abibisem: Journal of African Culture & Civilization*, Vol. 2, (2009), p. 32.
6. For David Hume’s assertion, see Basil Davidson, *Old Africa Rediscovered* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1970), p. 20.
7. For the views of Trollope and the former governor of Nigeria, see Michael Crowder, *West Africa Under Colonial Rule* (London: Hutchinson and Co (Publishers) Ltd. and Benin City: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 1968), p. 10.
8. See Lord Lugard’s *Dual Mandate*, pp. 1–2 for former quotation, and p. 66 for the latter.
9. Margery Perham’s assertions are cited in Crowder, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
10. R. Cornevin’s view is cited in Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Towards a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (London: James Currey Ltd., 1990), p. 303.
11. The African child during the colonial period found himself physically in an African environment but whatever he was taught was alien to the African terrain in entirety. This was primarily the work of the so-called missionaries in their alleged propagation programmes. The situation is even worse today as many African universities still contribute to Europeanisation in the form of mounting more courses, for instance in history, on subjects that perpetuate the idea of white-racial supremacy and African inferiority. In some universities, students are made to register courses in European history every semester for their four-year studies.

12. Regarding Seligman's statement, while Daniel F. McCall has what has been incorporated into the main text, Fage has "The civilisations of Africa are the civilisations of the Hamites; its history the record of these peoples and of their interactions with ... other African stocks [such as] the Negro" (Fage, 1969: 7). There is, thus, a little difference in the two. All the same, the import is the same in both.
13. Though it is not unlikely that Hausa-speaking peoples had been in touch with Berber-speakers from ancient times, there is no evidence at all to suppose that this contact produced the Hausa state. For a detailed analysis refuting H.A.S. Johnston's assertion, see Kwanashie, et al., 1987: 60.

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