

SILENCES IN AFRICAN HISTORY:
BETWEEN THE SYNDROMES
OF DISCOVERY AND ABOLITION

Silences in African History:

*Between the Syndromes of
Discovery and Abolition*

by
Jacques Depelchin



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I dedicate this book to the memory of Philippe Enoch Wamba
dia Wamba who died prematurely on September 11, 2002.
His book *Kinship: A Family's Journey in Africa and America* can
be looked at as a contribution towards unveiling silences and an
appeal to all the people of the world to heal.

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Preface

The production of academic knowledges about the African pasts took place in the context of decolonisation — the formal dismantling of the imperial domain. African historians, primarily the Nigerians who took the lead in this historic enterprise, were confronted with the Herculean task of producing historical knowledges for a group of people who were seen by the hegemonic other as lacking any history/sense of history. The colonial matriarch of the moment, Margery Perham, defined Africans in racial terms: a collection of primitive ‘tribes’ with no clothes, no brick wall dwellings, no major historical monument, and therefore No History! This Hegelian ex-cathedra was to be reproduced a decade later by Hugh Trevor Roper. The monumental/pioneering task of producing and recovering the collective pasts of the different peoples of the continent were shaped by a conscious ‘othering’ of cultures and peoples which found expression in a powerful and rigid binary: those with history versus those without history! The immediate collective responses from African historians, and their Africanist colleagues — non-Africans who study Africa — were simply to demonstrate that Africa indeed had a glorious past.

Affirming and documenting the existence of a glorious past, and producing historical knowledges for the nation-states in the making became the two most distinguishing features of the new historiography. African historians, not Africanists, took the lead in defining the field. Yet fifty years later the story is completely different: African historians are marginal to a scientific field of enquiry that supposedly produces knowledge about their societies.

Long before it became fashionable in academic circles to question the legitimacy of knowledge produced by outsiders, Africans and other colonised populations had raised troubling questions about the possibility/impossibility of understanding and representing them to other cultures. The representation of Africa, Columbus style, which emerged in the context of colonialism, survived the demise of formal colonial domination. It was reproduced in not so subtle forms with refinements here and changes there in studies dealing with non-hegemonic cultures and peoples. Inherent in this missionary project is a simple but powerful claim of superiority versus inferiority founded on colonial/post-colonial power and arrogance. The description and representation about other cultures affirms the power and dominance of the imperial other; it is the coloniser and the native once again, who, in the immortal words of Fanon, know each other just too well. It is also about the outsider

(observer) and the native (observed) as much as it is about defining and representing a particular group of people to the world. Africans, in the Diaspora or in the continent, remain the only group of people whose academic historians are predominantly non-Africans.

The representation of Africa by outsiders and the hierarchical othering of cultures and peoples therefore compel us to pose vexing questions — theoretical, empirical, ethical and moral — even if we cannot provide immediate answers, about the knowledge that is being produced about peoples without histories! Some of these questions revolve around the kind of historical knowledge being produced about Africa by Africanists in the Euro-American academy and the resultant exclusionary conversations (debates?) about Africa in which Africans do not take part. The narrativisation of this exclusion constitutes a significant portion of the fifty years story of African academic history. Thus Cheikh Anta Diop is written out of history; Egyptian civilisation rooted out of Africa; the European slave trade declared an unprofitable commercial venture; and colonialism pronounced a non-hegemonic project. It is such nuanced nonsense that Jacques Depelchin, a veteran practitioner-cum-activist historian, or what the French would call an intellectual engagé, sets out to capture in *Silences*.

Is studying Africa the same as writing for Africa? When does writing about Africa become speaking for Africa? Who should speak for the African past(s) and in what manner? These were some of the questions that a young Nigerian, Kenneth Dike, the first to graduate with a doctorate in African history, was trying to answer when he wrote a rejoinder challenging the racist formulation of Dame Perham. This was in 1953, two years after he graduated from London University. The editors of *West Africa* magazine agreed to publish his rejoinder but had to remind him that the proofs were to be shown to Dame Perham before publication! This encounter between a young African graduate looking for an outlet to publish his/her views and an indomitable racist was to be reproduced a thousandfold in subsequent years. In the words of J.F. Ajayi, another Nigerian historian, it simply meant that the new African historiography had to be acceptable to the West; legitimacy for the new discipline had to come from the imperial citadel of learning; the business of history or knowledge production and validation was too important to be left to the colonised to handle or manage. Decolonisation or independence would not translate to freedom of thought. In the context of the cold war, it meant anything but that!

As Delpelchin shows again and again in *Silences*, it is not enough to talk about sources and methodology; it is just not enough to continue to bemoan archival sources or belabour the point that such sources overwhelmingly recount the deeds of victors. Africanist historians would do better if they take seriously the injunction that they come from the dominant and dominating cultural milieu (read power), whose very existence is much at odds with the production of an emancipatory history capable of speaking to

the complex issues of individual and collective survival that has shaped the existence of the colonised/post-colonial world since it was constituted almost six hundred years ago.

The minimum pre-condition for the emergence of such history is the creation of an African scientific space that would transcend and subvert what Depelchin calls paradigmatic silences: silences that are difficult to detect because they are framed in such a way that they evade crucial theoretical questions. Such a project would not only confront the resultant collateral damage that such silences have spawned — which range from a denial of African contribution to civilisation to the refusal to acknowledge African authorship in the sphere of knowledge production — but also nurture an epistemological rigour to combat the widespread culture of impunity practised by ‘Africa’s most dangerous marabouts’.

How do we begin to write/right these wrongs in an age of so-called globalisation wherein peoples of different and diverse cultures are calling for and demanding that they own their history? Does demand for ownership undermine intellectual rigour and scholarship? What is the relationship between history, memory, ownership and colonialism? What would become of the holocaust story if that history were to be written by Nazi sympathisers/German historians? How would the Intifada be presented if that history were to be written in Tel Aviv? Can we entrust the history of genocide to genocidaires? What would become of European history if it were to be written predominantly by Africans or other colonised peoples? What would the history of America be from the standpoint of Africans/the indigenous peoples? These questions revolve around issues of ethics in academic/professional history, the morality of knowledge production, and the democratisation and ownership of knowledge. *Silences* deals with these and other questions that are central to how we can begin to imagine an emancipatory discourse anchored on centuries of exploitation and popular resistance.

This is a book about academic violence; collective intellectual denial; culpable erasure; and deliberate omission. But it is also about emancipation and liberation; for it explores the complex linkages between historical knowledge and our collective freedom.

Ibrahim Abdullah
Freetown, May 2004

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Silences and Related Syndromes in African History

Relations of domination and silences

It is a cliché to state that history as professionally practised has been mostly shaped by the forces which have emerged victorious from open, hidden, and/or muted confrontations of all kinds, between communities, nations, classes, clans, gender, which may or may not have exploded into warfare. Yet, comparatively speaking, such a recognition has not been followed by related efforts to study the history of the vanquished with the same kind of respect, intensity and, yes, awe, which are exhibited toward the other side.¹ In great part for economic reasons (most generally the winners hold the purse strings or control access to the necessary resources), but also for political and ideological reasons, it is usually easier to go along with than to swim against the current. It is generally more comfortable and more comforting to work on the side of the winners since they are the living proofs of that history, and whiners are advised to stop complaining about being on the losing side.² As Edward Said and, more recently, Jacques Rancière have demonstrated, the cultural environment of imperialism imposes ways of seeing, thinking and reasoning which do not need to be articulated because, so to speak, 'they go without saying' (Said 1993; Rancière 1992, 1994).³ Finally, with regard to specific requirements of historians, the winners' histories will tend to determine the rules along which historical research and methods will be developed.

Presented this way, the problem is oversimplified because there is much more at stake than the issue of knowing which history should be promoted. The question is how to move away from the embedded practices of policing knowledge, how to prevent the sterilisation of knowledge (history), and instead to allow it to become emancipatory. The increasing preoccupation with studies of the other, of how to understand and practise multiculturalism, does contain such possibilities, but also carries with it the seeds of reproducing and not transforming the structures of domination.⁴

I have yet to come across an account of an imagined generic *What is History?* which would deal with problems pertinent to the specificity of African history. But the problem is compounded by the fact that the discipline has been mostly shaped by individuals and/or institutions which, directly or indirectly, were connected to, and thus had a vested interest in, the reproduction of histories of Africa which did not challenge currently established relations of power.

In short, insofar as historians echo or produce texts shaped by relations of power (articulated through a gender, class, race and/or cultural specific perspective), the critical exercise around the use of evidence — which begs the question: for whose benefit? — cannot be reduced (as it tends to be) to how well the research techniques and methods are used. Even these are not as innocent or neutral as they are often presented as being, since they are also part and parcel of the relations of domination, which have characterised the historical contacts between Africa and Europe for the past few centuries. In such a contentious context, any selection of themes, problems, periods or controversies to be investigated is bound to be determined by political, social, economic, cultural and ideological reasons.

In his overview of the birth of academic African history in *Living With Africa* and ‘Some Perceptions on the Writing of African History: 1948-1992’, Jan Vansina never deals frontally with the fact that, as constructed, it is a by-product of relations of domination and exploitation. While he is unambiguously clear about his opposition to colonial rule, the choice of topics reflects the abolitionist syndrome in that the implicit condemnation of colonialism did not lead to explicit efforts toward the decolonisation of history.⁵ For him the selection of issues to be studied did not really matter, and his discussion of the rules of evidence obviously assumes that they are the same everywhere, an argument at odds with his own warnings in *Oral Tradition* about how to treat historical records coming from the rulers (Vansina 1994, 236-243). Finally, although aware of the fact that his intellectual adventure was taking place in the context of the Cold War, he never seriously addressed how this was bound to influence the future and to whom the resources for the establishment of the field would be channelled, not to speak of how individuals like him would frame and prioritise the questions to be asked. After all, if critical analyses of anthropology had shown how anthropologists had reproduced colonial ideology, would it not be logical to expect the selected ‘lights’ of area studies financed by American foundations to reproduce the ideology of the Cold War, and be influenced by it?

As a reproducer of histories and an expert on how to research histories, Vansina focuses only on the technical problems posed by his outsider’s position. He never faces the blunt problem posed by his position in a static and dynamic structure of power relations. His dismissive and distorting treatment of Cheik Anta Diop’s earliest work (particularly *Nations, Nègres et*

Culture and The Cultural Unity of Black Africa) is less derogatory than that of Raymond Mauny's, one of the main organisers of the International African Institute meeting in Dakar in December 1961. In a footnote, Vansina wonders whether Diop's absence was the result of a boycott or deliberate exclusion (Vansina 1994, 99, 271n), but from *The Historian in Tropical Africa*, the text he co-edited with Mauny and L.-V. Thomas, the former made it implicitly clear why Diop was kept out: he was challenging well-encrusted ideas and notions about African history, and, by implication, well-established scholars like Mauny. Mauny reacted to Diop's challenge in the same manner the King of Belgium and the Belgian political establishment had reacted to Patrice Lumumba's unexpected Independence speech. Mauny's reaction against and Vansina's almost disingenuous musing about Diop's absence illustrates the kinship between the abolitionist syndrome (Vansina's) and the syndrome of discovery (Mauny's). Diop's autonomous, and reactively creative independent search for legitimisation of African academic history, could not be accepted by those who had pronounced themselves the 'discoverers' of the field. As Peter Abrahams wrote in *Mine Boy*, Europeans, whether from the right or the left, always like to be able to pronounce on who the good Africans are: invariably they are those who agree with their views.⁶

What *Living with Africa* shows is that Jan Vansina's access to financial resources, his belonging to the same dominant, social, ideological and cultural circles, was bound to influence the directions that African academic history was going to take. Resources and the ideological context of the Cold War were crucial. However, the so-called triumph of the Free World has meant that there is even less pressure to examine critically the ways in which the Cold War did distort the choices which were made. How destructive these choices have been will take some time to sink in, but they are already apparent at the economic level, not just in Africa, but the world over.

Among those who have suffered enslavement, colonisation, steady and relentless economic exploitation, cultural asphyxiation, religious persecution, gender, race and class discrimination and political repression, silences should be seen as facts. A matter of course in psychoanalysis, this statement would horrify historians who worship concrete tangible facts. The story of Rodney King's brutal beating at the hands of Los Angeles Police officers would never have made the headlines had it not been for advances in video technology and the presence of mind of an observer. As matters stand one can only hope that advances in brain scanning devices will soon make it possible to trace any of the above violations of human rights on the human body and mind just as it is possible to trace the natural and human assaults suffered by trees by examining a cross-section. If physicists have been able to detect persisting echoes of the big bang, why can one not detect the still vibrating echoes of torture and death suffered by past generations?

Massive collective silences such as those which first denied the Holocaust

or fifty years later denied the Genocide in Rwanda and Burundi are different from the individual silences. Unless one has been there, as once so aptly put by Elie Wiesel, it is difficult to discuss questions like these, but it would not be unfair to assume that collective fright in the face of terror and extermination would raise the individual silence exponentially by an unimaginable factor.⁷ Indeed, there is a point where someone under severe and collective physical and psychological intimidation wishes to be silent forever (*African Rights* 1994, inside cover). Silences are facts which have not been accorded the status of facts. How and why this occurred has become increasingly evident as those who have been forced into silence or who are supposed to remain silent realise that they and they alone can truly tell the story.

Victims of torture often find that silence is the best way of ensuring sanity. Knowing that a person has been tortured can be documented from oral or written archives. The quality of that knowledge and that of the person who has suffered the torture would defy any measuring device, as has been shown by accounts from Holocaust survivors or those who have survived its most recent modernised version in Rwanda. Thus, the uncovering of silences is not just a question of going after the facts which have triggered direct or indirect silences. The quality of the record can be altered, often dramatically, by well-meaning mediators (abolitionists, human rights advocates). Just as the measure of what has been suffered can be assessed only by those who have suffered, so too the measure of what has caused the silences. From enslavement, through pacification campaigns, *Red Rubber* (Morel 1906) and its variations, colonial occupations, the continuation of colonial rule by other means through destabilisation, and low intensity warfare, the common thread has been the promotion and defence, by any means necessary, of one socio-economic system: capitalism.⁸ Through it, a dynamic driven by technological and 'market' forces has taken over, with no one claiming (or daring to assign) responsibility. The promotion of individualism has paradoxically resulted in the silencing of individuals when faced with assigning responsibility for crimes against the community.

Attempts to build alternatives to the Gulags have also generated, among the very people who were supposed to be the beneficiaries, silences as destructive as those which were endured by those whose blood has contributed to make capitalism the triumphant system it has become today. But whereas the uncovering of silences from the victims of the various socialist Gulags has helped to bring about fundamental changes in the ways in which we think and conceptualise the alternatives, there is no sign yet that the uncovering of silences resulting from the excesses of capitalism (e.g., from Apartheid in South Africa to global Apartheid) will lead to profound changes in how the system is operating.

Thus, for example, if one examines the historiography of resistance in Africa, the interest is focused on the facts of resistance, and less on how the