

Document Delivery



TN #: 636682

Shipping Option: **Odyssey**

Adewale Fadugba
afadugba@buffalo.edu
7164910442

Master
American Studies
afadugba

Comments:

Notes: BA_YearFixer::UnableToFix[NO_YEAR]

Need by: 04/29/2019

Journal Title: Writing African History

Volume: Issue:

Month/Year: Pages:

Article Author: Isaac Olawale Albert

Article Title: Data Collection and Interpretation in the Social History of Africa

Imprint:

Item #:

Call #: DT19 .W75 2005

Location: Lockwood Library General Collection

Date Received: 2/1/2019 10:56:35 AM

Notice: This material may be
protected by copyright law (Title
17 U.S. Code)

Status: _____

Date Cancelled: _____

Reason Cancelled: _____

Date Sent: _____

Number of Pages: _____

University at Buffalo Libraries, Document Delivery Services
BUF NYUSB
716-645-2812 buflend@buffalo.edu

BUF - Document Delivery

11

DATA COLLECTION AND INTERPRETATION IN THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF AFRICA

Isaac Olawale Albert

Introduction

Discussions at academic and policy forums all over the world are evidence of a growing interest in Africa's social history. Meanwhile, since the 1960s, when most African nations regained their independence from erstwhile colonial masters, the continent's social, political, and economic conditions have been going from bad to worse. Although attempts to explain these developments have thus far been monopolized by social scientists, African problems might be better understood from a historical standpoint, for history digs more deeply than political science, sociology, or anthropology in explaining the etiology of social problems.

Unfortunately, few historians have shown an interest in explaining the growing problems in African development. This unsatisfactory situation should be reversed; historians, especially those within Africa, should show more interest in the study of social problems on the African continent, thus enabling them to make better contributions to contemporary African development. This chapter addresses some salient methodological issues that social historians must take into consideration in their bid to understand the challenge of social development in Africa.

A historian has two main responsibilities: collecting the facts and interpreting them. These tasks are intertwined:

To do the one without the other reduces the historian to either a chronicler or a teller of tales. From ancient times, of course, history has always been part chronicle and part tale, but in our modern age previous generations of historians, under the impact of science, have set out to collect and interpret the facts scientifically, seeking to arrive at an objective and true rendering of history.¹

Thus, this chapter has two objectives: to discuss, first, how the data for writing the social history of Africa can be collected and, second, how to interpret these facts. The tasks before us might not, in fact, be too different from what beset those writing the social history of other parts of the world. Social history is basically interested in human actions. As Nzemeke tells us in 1989, the actions of humans everywhere have a fundamental similarity, notwithstanding the cultural variations that condition them. It is difficult to claim exclusive peculiarity for the social history of Africa, for history is simply history.

What is probably peculiar to Africa is that social history is not very popular—especially among the indigenous historians.² This is surprising, considering the degree of social transformation that has taken place in different parts of the continent, especially since the beginning of the twentieth century. Why is social history not popular in Africa? To answer this question, we first need to define what is meant by social history. Historians do not agree on what to include or exclude from this special field. The consensus is that it is a total history. As Eric Hobsbawn tells us:

Social history can never be another specialisation like Economics or other hyphenated histories because its subject matter cannot be isolated. We can define certain human actions as economic, at least for analytical purposes and then study them historically. . . . In much the same way though at a lower level of theory, the old kind of intellectual history which isolated written ideas from their human context and traced their filiation from one writer to another is possible, if one wants to do that sort of thing. But the social or societal aspects of man's being cannot be separated from the other aspects of his being, except at the cost of tautology or extreme trivialisation. . . . The intellectual historian may [at a risk] pay no attention to economics, the economic historian to Shakespeare, but the social historian who neglects either will not get far. Conversely, while it is extremely improbable that a monograph on provençal poetry will be economic history or one on

inflation in the sixteenth century intellectual history, both could be treated in a way to make them social history.³

What Hobsbawn, like many other scholars, means is that the field of social history is very broad. Within this framework, Ade Ajayi, the doyen of African history, defined social history as a study of the change in pattern of daily life, the emphasis being on how people lived at different times in the past, what music, dance, architecture, marriage, and family life they favored, what religion insofar as this impinges on daily life, and the pattern of change in the totality of life that these imply.⁴ The emphasis of this type of history is on continuity and change in how people live their lives. In other words, the basic challenge of social history can be said to be a fuller understanding of the complex processes that have led to the emergence of human society in its present form.⁵

M. H. Dawson, in a paper on the future of social history in Africa, also observed that this specialist field overlaps other aspects of history to the extent that its boundaries with political, economic, intellectual, and religious history are blurred or difficult to delineate.⁶ Against the background of the opinions of these two eminent historians, social history is presented in this chapter as that aspect of history that uses a sociological approach to explain past economic, political, environmental, intellectual, and other related events. It explains changes and the factors responsible for them in historical terms.⁷

We can now go back to the question raised earlier: the underdevelopment of social history in Africa. Why is this the case? To use Ajayi's language,⁸ why is the social history of Africa left to the tender mercies of political scientists and others who analyze questionnaires and so on? Attempting to answer the question, Ajayi suggested that many African historians begin by studying areas in which their own cultural and linguistic competencies confer an advantage. The historian lives in Yorubaland in Nigeria and therefore writes about one small community in Yorubaland, or belongs to the Akan in Ghana and thus focuses attention on those people. Broad-based subject matter is simply not of interest. Even more problems are faced after doctoral work is completed. Most of these historians, according to Ajayi, find it difficult to work on issues or employ methods different from those used during their doctoral research. Here lies the crux of the matter. He notes further that probably the most limiting factor determining preference is that of sources, how easily accessible and how easily digestible. Historians often pitch their tents where they can find ready-made (documentary) or oral data. I wholeheartedly agree with Ajayi

that African historians find it difficult to study outside their narrow environment and field of specialization, preferring to focus their work on a narrow geographical environment. In most cases their focus is on the polity rather than on social issues. They therefore hardly need the cross-cutting research methodology that social or economic history would require.

The present situation can be further accounted for. As part of the struggle against a European ideological framework, the earliest historians in Africa were trained to write political or cultural history, to the neglect of the economic and social history of the continent.⁹ The basic goal of this clearly defensive history was to counter the dangerous lies Europeans has systematized and institutionalized about the African past.¹⁰ One major object of attack by the historians was the colonial myth that Africans lacked the capacity for governing themselves. H. R. Trevor-Roper specifically asserted that Africans had no history beyond the activities of the colonial masters and Christian missionaries from Europe.¹¹ Trevor-Roper, himself a historian, is reported to have wondered why historians who are supposed to be engaged in the serious business of reconstructing the past should amuse themselves with the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe. To challenge him and others like him, several early African and black American historians began to use oral traditions and other available sources to show that many Africans had a glorious past before the European incursion. The *raison d'être* of most of the researches conducted and courses taught in African universities was, and still is, to show that Africans could really manage their own affairs independent of the European intruders. Whereas this old system could be said to be appropriate for the time when it was developed, the present deserves a new approach if history is to play its expected role in national development. Once more we quote Ade Ajayi:

The situation has changed from the first days of independence when the objectives of historical education were mainly those of decolonization and trying to persuade others that we have a history. We now need to examine what positive objectives historical education should have in Nigeria today and how to achieve them.¹²

The defensive history written by Africans had a class bias. The emphasis was on kings and kingdoms. The present-day African historian has therefore been trained to write more on the hegemonic class, not as

much on the masses whose energy daily creates and recreates civilization.¹³ We know more of the precolonial African leaders like Sonni Ali, Mansa Musa, Askia the Great, Idris Aloma, and others than of the people they governed. Those who have written the political history of colonial Africa had the same problem. They told us mostly about District Officers, Residents, Provincial Governors, and so on, as well as the leaders of resistance movements. An understanding of the social life of the colonial subjects is hardly documented by these historians. Even in the present, more is written about Mobutu, Bokkassa, Idi Amin, Abacha, etc. than the hapless and helpless people these despots governed.

Is it possible for us to have a complete picture of the past using the vocal lens of the hegemonic class? The answer is no. What we therefore know about the precolonial, colonial, and even postcolonial African past today is a small fraction of what could be known. Having a full picture of what really happened requires us to adopt the social historical approach. Social history is a remarkable departure from the traditions of history conceived in terms of the deeds of the hegemonic class; it is interested in the entire society, not just a section of it. It is within this framework that social history is interested in such crosscutting subjects as health, migrations, governance, and so on.

This kind of history becomes a necessity for Africans, given the present state of development in the continent. Several parts of Africa are today less developed than they were some thirty years ago. The role of history, in addition to proving that Africa does have a history, should be to explain why every good thing fails in modern Africa. European colonialism has been replaced by neocolonialism in all parts of the continent. War, economic crisis, poverty, corruption, political underdevelopment, and environmental degradation are everywhere. As the international community battles to give the African continent a future, in terms of humanitarian intervention in war situations, promotion of democratic principles and good governance, granting of international aid, rescheduling of unpaid loans, and sponsoring of research to stem different kinds of diseases decimating the people of the continent, the historians in the continent are still singing "We have a history."

This monologue of the deaf must stop. The production of knowledge in Africa must reflect the challenge of globalization. Historians are therefore challenged to give better attention to social history with a view to generating thoughts that could be used to solve the mounting problems of social, economic and political development in the continent. Historical works on Africa now need to be grounded in social context.

One other noticeable problem with the defensive history of the past must be mentioned. That history failed to evolve any concrete hypothesis or theory to give unity or internal coherence to the African past. To this extent, African historians have not been able to provide any detailed interpretation of the African past. The history of the Ghana, Mali, Songhai, and other empires and kingdoms are stories of different forms of imperialism—probably not too different from the European imperialism in Africa. The African imperialism was presented in most of the books as a thing of beauty and therefore a joy forever. In the light of this, should we have a second look at the works on European imperialism? The point is that most of the works on the empires and kingdoms in Africa were produced without any questions as to whether the motive force for such an empire was egocentric, dynastic, or even something baser. If, on the other hand, it was based on a noble idea, no effort has been made to find out how close each empire or kingdom, in its day-to-day performance and its political and class structure, came to that idea.¹⁴ All these questions and problems arise simply because the African past has not been approached from the social historical perspective.

Social problems are better understood and analyzed using theories. But the African historian was trained to fight shy of theoretical issues.¹⁵ These scholars accused African history of being theoretically impoverished, lacking in rigorous materialism, yet characterized by politically suspect radicalism and essentially limited to issues of tribes, ethnic groups, and kingdoms. The professional historian in the continent is not interested in making predictions but, instead, in just telling the stories in more detailed form than the mainstream social scientist would do. However, without theories and predictions neither social science nor a thorough social history can be written.

Another problem is that most African historians, by training and practice, were and are slaves to documentary evidence. They have little faith in the unconventional sources used by the social scientists. They still approach the written document with bowed heads and speak of it in awed tones. "If you find it in the documents, it is so."¹⁶ The paradox is that the kinds of problems a social historian is supposed to be studying do not easily lend themselves to documentary evidence. Ethnicity, corruption, poverty, and the like are more often expressed in people's actions than what they commit into writing. Information relating to any of these issues is deliberately distorted in most cases where it is found in writing. This means that the social historian must go extra miles to sources for data, and then must also interpret them.

The conservatism of the professional historian has been an issue of discussion for a long time. In *The Fashion and Future of History*, B. E. Schmitt rightly predicted in 1960 that the death of historical scholarship in several parts of the world was just a matter of time if the professionals in the field refused to change their research themes and methods. Schmitt called for a development-relevant kind of historical scholarship and noted the need to adjust to changing times and not be bound by customary conventional approaches.¹⁷ In a learned presentation, Ajayi has expressed concern about this same ugly development, noting that

In our search for the philosophy to guide social evolution, for the understanding of the dynamics and consequences of economic change, for the historical perspective to provide meaning for the apparently chaotic changing going on around us, history has a vital role to play. In our training of historians and the teaching of history to nonspecialist as well as in historical education at other levels, we do need this greater awareness of society and social concerns.¹⁸

My interaction with historians and students of history in the developed parts of the world suggests that Schmitt's advice has been heeded in many such places. Many departments of history and historians in Africa are still where they were several decades ago. They have not changed and are not changing. This explains why these historians are not much involved in the heated social science debate on the trajectories of development in their continent. This is why social scientists are taking it upon themselves to write the historical background to their publications rather than leaving this for historians to do, although in the past historians were customarily invited to write that aspect of any work.

Sources for the Social History of Africa

Social history is a broad field that, *inter alia*, captures issues germane to governance, economics, population, labor, religion, law, medicine, family, environment, conflict, and gender studies. Like every other discipline that uses qualitative research methodology, social history probably does not have any specific theory, paradigm, or method that it can strictly claim as its own. However, it integrates information from semiotics, narrative, content discourse, archives, phonemic analysis, and even statistical data. It draws insights from the approaches, methods, and techniques of

ethno-methodology, phenomenology, cliometrics, feminism, deconstructionism, ethnographies, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, survey research, and participant observation, among others.¹⁹ The field involves the study, use, and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case studies, personal experiences, life stories, interviews, and observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe both routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives.

This kind of history enables the professional historian to actively participate in the contemporary debate on the trajectories of development in the society. To this extent, social historians around the world enjoy a prime place in the assembly of social scientists. It logically follows therefore that field methods in social history are not too different from those of the mainstream social scientists like political scientists, economists, sociologists, feminists, and so on. The major difference is that the social historian is more interested in the facts of what happened than in formulating theories—the emphasis of the mainstream social scientists. Nonetheless, to become a social historian a student of history must be ready to critically study how social scientists do their work. The social historian must have a good understanding of social science epistemology, concepts, theories, and field methods. Little wonders that the Council for the Development of Social Science in Africa (CODESRIA) noted in 1989 that African historians must begin to pay attention to criticism from the researchers in such other areas as the social sciences, the natural sciences, and the aesthetic disciplines, as well as from the common masses; historians must have the courage to step over traditional academic walls into a multidisciplinary praxis.²⁰ Within this framework we can consider the social historical methodology to be simply a combination of historical and mainstream social science methodologies.

The social historians of Africa have three major roles. The first is to attempt a reconstruction of the African past, with substantial consideration of social concerns. The second is to provide a social perspective of the culture and political history of Africa as written by past writers. The third is to attempt to write the contemporary history of Africa, with a view to shedding light on why Africa is underdeveloped and what could be done to give the continent a future.

There are primary and secondary data for writing any type of history. Secondary sources are materials already existing on issues germane to the subject of investigation—for example, the work of other historians, communication specialists, literary critics, and scholars in other fields of specialization, and most of all the mainstream social scientists.²¹ The

contemporary historian of Africa is therefore confronted with vast amounts of written material. The social scientists have taken more time than the professional historians to study and analyze social situations in Africa, but the work often lacks time depth and is sometimes impressionistic. Many social scientists have written on Africa without knowing the antecedents of what they wrote about; thus they often make misleading generalizations. A social historian reading these works can use the knowledge of history to identify what is missing and can be filled in. In some cases, the historian studying issues already addressed by social scientists just needs to dig deeper and subject the data to more rigorous explanation. Within this vital framework of explanation, the work of historians appears more acceptable than the reconstructions of the mainstream social scientists.

Social historians can also use existing references in the social science work to their advantage. For example, a social historian studying migrations in nineteenth-century Nigeria might look up the references of geographers, sociologists, and economists who have studied migrations in the contemporary period. These references in the work of social scientists might steer the social historian towards recognition of essential issues, perspectives, theories, and methodologies. This is helpful for the historian not originally trained to do social science but now compelled, as a social historian, to be half historian and half social scientist.

In reviewing relevant secondary sources and critically studying references, one must raise certain questions about what others have written. Some such questions are suggested by Tuchman:²² Why is this author making this argument? Do other scholars dispute this argument? Why these particular materials, but not the others? Do the author's questions suggest other issues relevant to the project at hand? To answer such questions, one could check book reviews to see how the material under consideration was received.

Secondary sources do not contribute to the originality of one's work as the primary sources do. Tracking down primary historical data is very demanding, like doing detective work; it

involves logic, intuition, persistence, and common sense—the same logic, intuition, persistence, and common sense that one would use to locate contemporary data or information pertinent to one's daily life. For instance, if one needed a part for a refrigerator whose manufacturer had gone out of business, one would contact a specialist—an appliance service—to learn whether that firm has the part. If [it] does not, one might contact a series of appliance services. One will either find the part or learn that it is no longer available.²³

The identification of and search for primary historical data has to follow this rigorous pattern. Thus searching for primary social historical data requires great perseverance and doggedness.

What are these primary sources that the social historian has to keep track of? The first are archival records. Many African states have National Archives that store different forms of raw data considered to be of invaluable importance to a social historian. These include official documents like annual reports, parliamentary papers, statistical surveys, population census reports, interdepartmental correspondences from which several social issues can be deciphered, intelligence reports of colonial and post-colonial state officials, reports of commissions of inquiry, petitions, etc. Most archives in Africa have past newspapers, periodicals, and journals a scholar could search for social historical data. In addition to these archives, which house general information about each country, some African communities have local archives. In Nigeria, for example, the archives of some state and local governments have information particular to their societies. Outside Africa, archives housing important documents on social developments in Africa include the Public Records Office in London, the *Ministre d'outre-mer* in Paris, the German *Zentralarchiv* in Potsdam, and others. There are also some African Studies associations and Institutes around the world that keep important information about the African continent. One needs to know these establishments and their holdings to write about some African social issues.

Information collected from archives as well as gleaned from secondary sources could suggest to the social historian what other information would be needed for writing one's paper. The sad truth, however, is that not much information can be found from written sources for writing the social history of Africans. The existing literature on Africans is about the hegemonic class, as noted above. Social history is more interested in the common folk, is about the social experience of everybody. As Ekechi has said, the ideas and emotions of the masses, the majority of the population, are not expressed in writing but in oral and artistic forms.²⁴ How then do we study the patterns of thought of the masses? They can more properly be studied through ethnographic and oral sources.

In using ethnographic sources, the historian is merely aping the anthropologists. Ethnography is the central method of anthropologists. Ethnographic traditions are a twentieth-century development, and their history is closely connected to the shift of fieldwork methods by which anthropologists in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century came to base their work on firsthand information about the everyday life

of the people they studied. Ethnography, as McNeil noted, simply means, "writing about a way of life." It is also referred to as "field study" or "field-work."²⁵ The main work of the ethnographer is to describe a people's way of life—the emphasis is on the people's culture and lifestyle, describing as faithfully as possible how the people see themselves. The work of Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands, especially, gave rise to this field method. Writing on the rigors of this method of sourcing data, Malinowski noted:

The anthropologist must relinquish his comfortable position in the long chair on the verandah of the missionary compound, Government station, or planter's bungalow, where, armed with pencil and notebook and at times with a whisky and soda, he has been accustomed to collect statements from informants, write down stories, and fill out sheets of paper with savage texts. He must go into the villages, and see the natives at work in the gardens, on the beach, in the jungle. . . . Information must come to him full-flavoured from his own observations of native life, and not the squeezed out of reluctant informants as a trickle of talk. Field work can be done first or second hand even among the savages, in the middle of pile dwellings, not far from actual cannibalism and head-hunting. Open-air anthropology, as opposed to hearsay note-taking, is hard work, but it is also great fun. Only such anthropology can give us the all-round vision of primitive man and primitive culture.²⁶

The relevance of ethnography to social historiography is evident in the fact that it enables the historian to have a feel for how the people have been living their lives. The historian is basically interested in the past. By observing how the people live today, the historian can extrapolate or ask relevant questions as to how they lived in the past. He can do this because he understands that the present is a product of the past. As Marc Bloch observed, one must first look at the present, or what was recently the present, in order to understand that past.²⁷

Ethnography in the modern world is usually associated with and sometimes confused with "participant observation" by many students of African Studies. The two are not the same but are related, both being a uniquely humanistic, interpretive approach, as opposed to supposedly "scientific" and "positivist" positions. Within the ethnographic school, however, some scholars maintain "scientific" postures in their work. In practice, ethnography and participant observation methods are flexible. The work of those that embrace the "scientific" stance intertwine with those who reject such position in favor of advocacy and a critical stance.

Ethnographic methods rely in some aspects on participant observation. Ethnography as a practical social science method has the following features:²⁸

1. a strong emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena, rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them;
2. a tendency to work primarily with “unstructured” data, that is, data that have not been coded at the point of data collection in terms of a closed set of analytic categories;
3. investigation of a small number of cases, perhaps just one case, in detail; and
4. analysis of data that involves explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions, the product of which mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most.

What the social historian adopting the ethnographic method looks at is not limited to patterns of day-to-day existence of the people but also visual objects like dressing codes, inscriptions on vehicles and walls, and so on. All these move the researcher closer to the inner world of those being researched.

Participant observation is often the primary field method of ethnographers. The former is just a method of data collection in an ethnographic research project. In their own work, Schwartz and Schwartz defined “participant observation” as “a process in which the observer’s presence in a social situation is maintained for the purposes of scientific investigation.”²⁹ What amount of time must the historian adopting this approach for sourcing data spend in the field? This question is popular with anthropologists themselves. Past attempts to answer it have led some scholars to say clearly that not all observations are “participant” observations. There may be both participant and nonparticipant observation in a fieldwork situation. As M. Stacey noted, the former involves the researcher joining, as a member, the group being studied³⁰ and thus functioning both as a member and as an observer of how the society or group conducts its affairs. In this case, the group is studied from inside. The latter, on the other hand, requires the researcher to operate as an outsider, not really belonging to the group in terms of seeking means of integrate with it but merely interacting with the group sometimes informally to gain access to information about its operations. Either method could be used in a research project, depending on the amount of participation sought by the researcher and what those being studied could guarantee.

Closely related to ethnography and participant observation is the oral method of sourcing data (see chapters 6 and 7 in this volume). Oral data can be divided into two types, oral traditions and oral testimonies. Oral traditions are verbally transmitted information handed down across several generations. These include myths, epics, legends, proverbs, songs, etc. Such data can only be collected from elderly people in African society because some of them are of esoteric importance. Oral testimonies, on the other hand, are orally transmitted information collected from the *dramatis personae* in some social events, or from people who were informed about the events. The persons providing oral testimonies talk about what they felt rather than what they were forced to believe by their culture. Such testimonies can be collected in an interview situation. More information about the interviewing methods of sourcing social historical data follows below.

Merely living among the research subjects and observing their lifestyles as the ethnographers do might not provide all the information that researchers need. They therefore have to proceed further, to ask questions on things that seem unclear to them. Indeed, researchers often go straight to the interview techniques without first engaging in any formal process of ethnography and participant observation. In a real life situation, however, it is not possible to interview without first observing. This is because the questions asked in research situations are always based on things observed but about which detailed information was not available.

As Fontana and Frey noted, asking questions and getting answers “is a much harder task than it may seem at first. . . . Yet, interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings.”³¹ In most cases, an interview entails face-to-face verbal interchange between the interviewer and interviewee. It could involve single individuals or a group. An interview could be a “once-for-all” exercise or could span several days, months, or even years.

In a typical interview session, the interviewer defines what the respondent(s) is going to talk about and what information will count as being relevant. The basic goal of an interview is to gain insight into people’s experiences, opinions, aspirations, attitudes, and feelings. It requires a great deal of effort and skill to be able to do this. Interviews can be categorized into four major types according to how the questions are asked and answered. The four are:

1. Structured interview
2. Semi-structured interview

3. Unstructured or focused interview, and
4. Group interview.

The difference between the structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interviews could be seen in the mechanical shift from a situation in which the researcher attempts to control the interview through predetermining questions and thus teach the respondent to reply in accordance with the interview-schedule (standardization), to a situation in which the respondent is encouraged to answer a question in her or his own terms.³² In a situation of structured interview, the researcher has absolute control over the response of the respondent whereas the unstructured interview situation empowers respondents to say what they want to say in the way they feel like saying it. Social historians often use the semi-structured and unstructured types of interviews.

The unstructured interview is also known as focused interviewing or open-ended ethnography. In this method, the interviewer does have a list of questions or topics to be investigated, but the way the questions are presented is quite discretionary. Unstructured interviewing is most suitable for topics on which depth of understanding rather than large-scale coverage is involved. Unstructured interviewing is relatively flexible; its emphasis is on discovery of meaning rather than the standardization sought by the structured interview method. It could even take the form of interviewing by comment.³³ The interviewer stimulates the interest of the respondent in a topic and encourages discussion of the topic, making it more likely that the necessary concealed facts are revealed. An unstructured interviewer gathers data gradually by posing unstructured questions as prompted by the field situation and the countenance of the interviewee. Unlike the structured interviewer, those conducting unstructured interviews allow their personal feelings to dictate the kind of questions they ask; they also answer questions the respondent might pose to them. It is a more flexible kind of interviewing, although more demanding than structured interviewing. A researcher doing unstructured interviewing must have some basic information about the subject under investigation and must therefore be able to pose all necessary questions that could give a better knowledge of the situation. As each question is posed, clues will appear that suggest other questions to ask. The interview could therefore last for several hours or days—depending on the clues the interviewer can decipher in the process of talking to the respondent. In most cases, unstructured interviewing challenges the

researcher to further expand or narrow down the scope of the research. More, or possibly less, information than originally envisaged might result. This then forces an alteration of the original research focus or even the title of the project.

In collecting primary and secondary data, a social historian must be very inquisitive, critically examining every datum before taking it in. As Tuchman warned: Do not assume that anything about data is natural, inevitable, or even true.³⁴ To be sure, a datum has a physical presence: One may touch the page, picture, tombstone, or microfiche one has located. But that physical truth may be radically different from the interpretive truth needed to assess the application or test of a theory.

Problems of Interpretation

History is not just an assemblage of information about the past. The data have to be properly interpreted and given larger meaning than a layperson could readily apprehend from outside. After completion of fieldwork, the next major task for the social historian is therefore data interpretation. That a historian collected good data is not an absolute indication that good history will be written. Good history only flows from scientifically sound interpretation of good data. In the explanation process, the historian tries to unveil hidden meanings behind the available data. This is usually an invaluable but arduous task, given that the main goal of history is a pursuit of truth about past human situations and institutions. In interpreting data, the historian is not just shedding light but also searching for broader meanings for the research findings by linking them to other available knowledge. Such a search is geared towards two major objectives: to establish continuity in social research through linking the results of one study with those of another, and to identify new categories, explanatory concepts, and theories.³⁵

Interpretation of the social events must be preceded and accompanied by some sort of abstract reasoning. To this extent, interpretation involves philosophical and theoretical issues. The general questions that the historian has to answer include "how?" "why?" and "how important?" In answering the question "how?" a narration is called for. This requires that the events be described. This kind of exercise is known as narrative history. However, answers to the question "why?" lead to analytical history,³⁶ with its emphasis on reasons or causes. Social history requires a combination of the narrative and analytical approaches.

Answering the question "how important?" requires the historian to situate the findings in a larger global context. Theoretical positions or generalizations could be very useful here. A social historian could therefore have recourse to Marxist, Weberian, feminist, modernist, and post-modernist interpretation of specific phenomena. Theories enable the social historian to easily apprehend patterns the mainstream or traditional historian could take for granted. This is another respect in which the social historian is forced to behave like a mainstream social scientist. The researcher's knowledge, imagination, and even wisdom is called into play here. Of course, it must be noted that social historians bring their own points of view to bear on an argument. The more interpretive social researchers are, the better able they are to interpret their data and the more development or policy-relevant their work becomes. It is within this framework that the work of social historians studying similar subject matters differs. Issues pertaining to women's development, for example, could be interpreted from either feminist or Marxist perspectives.

As is true of many western social historians or social scientists with respect to Africa, it is difficult to interpret when lacking good background knowledge, and it is difficult to produce a scientific piece about a people with whom you have had very little contact. The social life of Africans, like any other peoples, are rooted in their various cultures and traditions. Failure to understand a culture and tradition can only lead to a poor analysis of day-to-day lives. For example, issues like corruption or ethnicity in Africa are difficult to understand without a sound knowledge of the people's kinship system. A corrupt politician in Africa is more likely to be recognized as a hero in the community than as a social irritant, although the latter is probably closer to the truth. Members of the community see such a person as an ambassador who has gone to the larger world to bring home the community's fair share of the national cake. If such a politician is called to order according to the law of the country, local people allege persecution of their community. If removed from power, the people allege ethnic marginalization. Within this framework, it is necessary for the social historian to start work by acquiring the necessary background information about the people being studied.

Data interpretation does not need to start at the end of the field research. As perceptive investigators collect data, they do not turn off their intellects. Eyes and ears are opened to discern the happenings around them. Available data in the field must be critically examined in their own right. Perceptive historians should be able to identify and refuse to accept the biases of sources. Interpretations of immediate situations will enable

them to ask more questions and collect more data from all possible sources, with a view to ensuring that the overall research results are scientifically sensible and plausible.

Interpretation of data in social history is more rigorous. The emphasis here is to refute or confirm claims, especially through the application of models. Interpretation facilitates an integrated understanding of human action. The historian is not satisfied just with what has been read, seen, or heard. He subjects everything to rigorous scrutiny by triangulating sources of information and subjecting information to the baptism of theoretical analysis. In the process, a social historian is able to move beyond the surface in accounting for past human actions. Imagine, for example, a social historian attempting to write on human rights in precolonial African society. Human rights is a twentieth-century concept in Africa. The historian writing about it using precolonial sources must be very perceptive, willing to test data against several human rights theories and models.

In attempting to reason beyond the surface, a social historian would not, for example, accept several conclusions reached by those who wrote on the precolonial African states, kingdoms, and empires. These polities were presented as models. Within what context? We were not told. Is a kingdom great just because of its mere existence, or because it was able to meet the needs of the people in it? There were many of these empires. In the Western Sudan, for example, were Ghana, Mali, Songhai, among others. As one empire fell, another was founded. Social historians are interested in rigorous debate of what led to the fall of the empires and kingdoms. Were they badly managed? What can the present learn from this kind of situation? Another example is the quality of leadership provided by precolonial African leaders like Sonni Ali, Mansa Musa, Askia the Great, Idris Aloma, etc. All these people were presented as great leaders. But it is difficult to understand the context within which these people could be said to be great. Were they visionary leaders, mediocre, or opportunists? A reinterpretation of what was said about them by a social historian shows clearly that they were the opposite of what past writers (most especially the political historians) considered them to be. This probably explains why nobody can uphold any of them today as exemplars of morality, accountability, and good governance. Let us take a look at some of the problems as presented by A. E. Afigbo:

[H]istory books write approvingly of Askia Muhammad Ture, of his Jihads and pilgrimage but gloss over his failure to know when to quit the political stage on grounds of age. Blind and decrepit, he had to be

removed in coup d'état led by his own children when he was 85 years old. In our own day we have become familiar with this kind of refusal on the part of African leaders to relinquish power with good grace. . . . Mansa Musa spent . . . wealth with such thoughtless abandon that he created an inflationary crisis in Egypt, while he himself ran out of money while still in the Holy Land and had to borrow money from an Alexandrian financier to pay his way back.

. . . If Mansa Musa's recklessness continues to be played up as having advertised the brilliance of the Western Sudan in his time, then we should stop complaining when our contemporary leaders buy up villas in Spain and elsewhere, stack up millions in Swiss banks.³⁷

What past writers on the precolonial African kingdom and empires succeeded in telling us is that precolonial African societies were well organized and led by some prominent individuals. One wonders if any of the volumes written actually came out in any concrete form to dispel Trevor-Roper's characterization of African social life as "unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe." The point being made is that all of African history must be reinterpreted taking into consideration social concerns. Social history has a social commitment to help ensure that past problems are not repeated. The kind of nationalist history that was written in the past hid a lot about the African past. Sick people do not get healed by pretending to be well, nor by not knowing they are sick. The genteel euphemisms that characterized the nationalist history of Africa are no longer sufficient for the present.

The above notwithstanding, African social problems must first be interpreted from the African perspective before any other perspectives. The African world is not always as the occidentals see it. Western writers often caricature the African systems. Africans are said to be corrupt, politically inept, environmentally deplorable, and so on—yet people from the same Western societies created some of the problems. But this hardly gets mentioned in the analysis of African problems. History is about truth. The pursuit of the truth, as Smith noted,³⁸ requires both a setting aside of all prejudice, so far as possible, and the exercise of empathy, the sensitive and imaginative effort to understand past societies and events in their own terms. Smith tried to shed better light on this in his process of discussing the question why, in history,

the historian is rarely, almost never, content to adduce only one explanatory factor. Even though he may conclude that one factor far outweighs all others in bringing about the explanandum, he will look for other factors which

interacted with, delayed, stimulated, or perhaps triggered off his grand single factor. But it is much more usual to find that a multiplicity of factors must be adduced, each in itself the result of a separate chain of development. To master all this material, classification is required, and such familiar labels as political, economic, ideological and the like play their [overlapping] parts. But containing and transcending all such divisions, the historian needs, consciously or unconsciously, openly or by stylistic concealment, to categorise his material according to the different levels at which it occurs.³⁹

Writing on competing approaches the historian could adopt for explaining or interpreting data, Smith noted that the following should be distinguished:

1. Long-term [or situational or dispositional or underlying] factors, which brought about a situation in which *y* became possible.
2. Medium-term or median factors which brought about a situation in which *y* became probable.
3. Occasions, precipitants or triggers, the factors [which in this case are nearly always the actions of one person or more] which made *y* all but certain—all but certain rather than certain because bullets may go wide, fuses may die out before reaching the powder barrel, and so on.⁴⁰

The historian must also establish the order of importance of the factors he adduces.

Social historians of Africa must therefore clearly separate between the internal and external catalysts of change in Africa. Africa having experienced colonialism, and still experiencing a period of neocolonialism, it is urgent that the social historian look beyond Africa, for example, for the explanation of the problems in the continent. Those writing about corruption in Africa collect hardly any data about the Western world in which the stolen moneys are kept. They hardly interrogate the developed civilization that makes it convenient to accommodate blood money from Africa. They hardly say anything about the Western companies that serve as couriers to those taking the money outside the African continent. When some Western writers talk about the political crisis in Africa, the Western scholars hardly mention the support corrupt and inept African political leaders get from the outside world against the hapless and helpless masses as long as the affected African leaders satisfy the narrow interest of some Western powers. Several other examples can be cited. Social history is about the masses; if carefully interviewed, the African masses

will openly deny some of the things the international world claimed to have contributed to African development. A single-cause explanation of African problems must stop if we are really interested in writing an objective social history of Africa. By a single-cause explanation is meant the explanation of a historical event or situation by only or primarily one single factor (cause), whether that factor is material, spiritual, or elemental.⁴¹ The African past must not be distorted or oversimplified.

Notes

1. R. O. Collins, *Problems in African History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ., 1968), 1.
2. E. A. Ayandele, "The task before Nigerian historians today," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 9, no. 4 (June 1979); F. Ekechi, "The future of the history of ideas in Africa," *African Studies Review*, 30, no. 2 (June 1987): 63–82; M. H. Dawson, "The social history of Africa in the future: medical-related issues," *African Studies Review* 30, no. 2 (1987): 83–91.
3. E. J. Hobsbawn, "From social history to the history of society," *Daedalus* (Winter 1971): 24.
4. J. F. A. Ajayi, "A critique of themes preferred by Nigerian historians," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 10, no. 3 (1980): 33–40.
5. R. Hallet, *Africa Since 1875* (London: Heinemann, 1974).
6. M. H. Dawson, "The social history of Africa in the future: medical-related issues," *African Studies Review* 30, no. 2 (1987): 83–91.
7. K. M. Phiri, "African history: An assessment and an agenda for future research," *African Studies Review* 30, no. 2 (1987): 35–48.
8. Ajayi, "A critique of themes preferred by Nigerian historians," 36–37.
9. J. F. A. Ajayi, "Introduction," *Tarikh*, vol. 9: *History and the Social Sciences* (Ikeja, Nigeria: Longman Nigeria Limited, 1990), 1; I. A. Akinjogbin, and S. O. Osoba, "Preface," in I. A. Akinjogbin, and S. O. Osoba (eds.), *Topics on Nigerian Economic and Social History* (Ile-Ife: University of Press Ltd., 1980), i; A. E. Afigbo, "The Poverty of Contemporary African Historiography," Public Lecture delivered under the auspices of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 1976.
10. O. E. Uya, *African History: Some Problems in Methodology and Perspectives* (Cornell University Press, 1974).
11. H. R. Trevor-Roper, "The rise of Christian Europe," *Listener*, November 28, 1963, 13.
12. J. F. A. Ajayi, "Historical education in Nigeria," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 8, no. 1 (1975): 3–8.
13. C. Ake, "History as the future of social science," *Tarikh*, vol. 9: *History and the Social Sciences* (Ikeja, Nigeria: Longman Nigeria Limited, 1990), 19–27.
14. Afigbo, "The Poverty of Contemporary African Historiography," 7.
15. Ajayi, "Introduction," 1; H. Bernstein and J. Depelchin, "The object of African history: A materialist perspective," *History in Africa* 5 (1978): 1–19, and 6 (1979): 17–42;

B. Freud, *The Making of Contemporary Africa: The Development of African Society since 1800* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1982).

16. Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (London: Penguin, 1983), 15; Carr was criticizing nineteenth-century European historians.

17. B. E. Schmitt, *The Fashion and Future of History: Historical Studies and Addresses* (Cleveland, Ohio: Press of Western Reserve University, 1960).

18. Ajayi, XXXX.

19. K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998).

20. CODESRIA Bulletin, Nos. 2 and 3, 1989, *African History: Perspectives for Tomorrow*, 6–15.

21. G. Tuchman, "Historical Social Science: Methodologies, Methods and Meanings," in K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.), *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998).

22. Ibid., 251.

23. Ibid., 252.

24. Ekechi, "The future of the history of ideas in Africa," 66.

25. P. McNeill, *Research Methods* (Routledge: London and New York, 1989), 64.

26. B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922), quoted in N. Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats and Others* (New York: Aldine, 1985).

27. M. Bloch, *French Rural History: An Essay on its Basic Characteristics*, trans. Janet Sondheimer (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1970), xxvi.

28. P. Atkinson, and M. Hammersley, "Ethnography and Participant Observations," in Denzin and Lincoln (eds.), *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, 10–11.

29. M. S. Schwartz and C. G. Schwartz, "Problems in participant observation," *American Journal of Sociology* (1954–55): 344.

30. M. Stacey, *Methods of Social Research* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1969).

31. A. Fontana, and J. H. Frey, "Interviewing: The art of science," in Denzin and Lincoln (eds.), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, 47.

32. Ibid., 110.

33. D. A. Snow, L. A. Zurcher, and G. Sjoberg, "Interviewing by comment: an adjunct to the direct question," *Qualitative Sociology* 5 (1982): 285–311.

34. Tuchman, "Historical Social Science," 256.

35. C. Selltitz, et al., *Research Methods in Social Relations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1959).

36. R. Smith, "Explanation in African History: How and Why," *Tarik* 21, vol. 6, no. 1: *Historical Method* (Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1978), 3.

37. A. E. Afigbo, "Reflections on the History Syllabus in Nigerian Universities," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 8, no. 1 (1975): 9–18.

38. Smith, "Explanation in African History, 1.

39. Ibid., 3.

40. Ibid., 4.

41. A. E. Afigbo, "Monocausal explanations in African history: A prevalent distortion," *Tarik* 21, vol. 6, no. 1: *Historical Method* (Essex: Longman Group Limited, 1978).