

VOLUME 12, SAGE SERIES ON AFRICAN MODERNIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Bogumil Jewsiewicki
David Newbury
Editors

African Historiographies

**What History
for Which Africa?**

Volume 12

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Preface

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—*Bogumil Jewsiewicki*
David Newbury

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Bogumil Jewsiewicki
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David Newbury

INTRODUCTION

One Historiography or Several? A Requiem for Africanism

BOGUMIL JEWSIEWICKI

If history as we practice it today is simultaneously both reconstruction of the past and project for the future, this volume is, at least in part, an imposture. As Ndaywel notes, the Africanist historian and the African historian fully share neither the same responsibilities nor the same existential constraints. And yet, the lost unity between these two sets of practitioners is partially reestablished by the social location associated with the production of Africanist discourse: In some respects African academics are closer to their colleagues in western universities than to the peasants of their "own" national society.

There is a striking contrast between the approaches adopted by university historians, of whatever nationality, and by historical narrators, whether performing in an urban bar or in a village ceremony (Jewsiewicki, 1984). Even while addressing the same issues, the two categories of narrator do not say the same things, because the discourse of the former must be directed primarily to an audience outside the historical actors. The discourse of a narrator of social facts who performs before "the people" (Bourdieu, 1983) to earn a living must first elicit a reaction among the social actors, a reaction that must find

Author's Note: I wish to express my thanks to V. Y. Mudimbe, D. Henige, D. Cordell, H. Moniot, J. Gregory, and D. Newbury for their comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

its resonance in the collective consciousness. Irrelevance in this context carries a heavy price, because it cuts off the performers from their living, although irrelevance upheld by state power, as illustrated in the case of Zairean “authenticity,” can be transformed into a strategic tool (Thompson, 1978a; Legendre, 1982).

I

A New Copernican Revolution: The Decolonization of History
[Sahli, cited in each issue of *Africa Zamani*].

Discourse based on Weberian rationalism and evolutionist historicism unifies participants at a level beyond the quarrels over a particular field of action. The type of analysis illustrated by the work of Cheikh Anta Diop is indicative of the broad scale on which such analyses take place. Many Western historians who would be prepared to argue the questions relating to pharonic negritude, were the debate to be carried out in its own terms, do not do so because they do not want to offend the sensitivities of their African colleagues. Diop's discourse divides African historians into unconditional supporters or opponents (for instance, see Obenga, 1980; Temu and Swai, 1981), but full debate is never engaged in by either group. From Laroui to Said in the Middle East, but also in many other cases (Berto, 1980; Larzac, 1971), historical and political experience show that calling for the decolonization of history is at the very least ambiguous (Rabinow, 1984). Lacking any social content, the greater the ambiguities in the Negro-Egyptian debate, the more the goal of “decolonization” reinforces rather than weakens Africanist epistemology.

Similarly, from their commitment to construct a veritable monument of respectability the authors of the UNESCO *General History* (1981) have avoided the essential questions, and focused instead on the simple chronological primacy of black civilization and its unity (Jewsiewicki, 1981a). As the inverse of the ideology of black inferiority, Diop's paradigm communicates essentially within the same epistemological framework, even if at the same time it reestablishes a degree of equilibrium to earlier arguments. But as with the colonial ethnographic corpus (Copans, 1980a, 1980b; Mudimbe, 1982b) and the “ethnoscience” (such as “ethnohistory” or “ethnophilosophy”; Houtondji, 1977; Mudimbe, 1984), this paradigm retains a slight “Odeur du Père” (Mudimbe, 1982a). Although useful for the political