

Session 2:
**Writing and Teaching National History in Africa in
an Era of Global History**

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This session of the colloquium began where the preceding one had left off, with the lead-in speaker, Professor Toyin Falola of the University of Texas, arguing that if ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ were meaningful concepts for historical understanding, so too was ‘nation’.

For him, national history was both meaningful and vital in the current era of globalisation, when global history was being touted as the only paradigm within which seriously to understand modern processes and events. Indeed, he believed that national history was an essential defence – even means of survival – against the dominant brand of global history in the contemporary world, which in his view amounted to ‘a narrative of western power and its expansion, ... [which sought to turn] the national history of one great power [the USA] into the metanarrative of global history ... by eras[ing] the experiences of so-called local identities, sweeping the dust of the ethnic under the carpet of the national, and the national itself under the table of the universal’.

He defended the idea of national history against those who regarded a national framework as either weak or untenable in the face of ‘transnational formation’, for the nation-state was still the most common political mechanism to organise people within distinct boundaries and under distinct governments, while national history was itself a major element in the nation-building process. As a powerful instrument against globalist attempts to provincialise the history of those outside the mainstream of Western history, it provided a means for non-Westerners to be heard amidst the most prominent version of global history which he perceived as an accompaniment to globalisation. Without national history, where, he asked, would the African voice, for instance, be heard in histories? National

history could not and should not ignore global history, but it should not be superseded by it either.

However, for all these positive features of national history, he was well aware that the concept and its application were not unproblematic. It was itself a construct too, which too often slurred over disparate local identities, trying to homogenise them with its excessive focus on the national state, its rulers and their interests and activities. Historians should always ask ‘whose nation, whose history?’ when attempting to write or read national history. A much broader conception of national history was necessary than was common in African historiography to date, one which was inclusive of all layers of society, not just the national elite, and one which also recognised how Western concepts of the nation and nationalism had been indigenised, enriched, energised and enhanced when transferred abroad. This was what had taken place at the University of Ibadan in the 1950s and 1960s, and this was the key to the success of authors like Soyinka and Achebe. For this reason he felt that ‘traditions, localism, communities, ruralism, indigenous knowledge should inform what we do against the background of external ideas and “universalistic” methodologies and approaches’. Such a broadly conceived national history should, in his opinion, inform university history syllabuses. ‘National history – rather than global history – can be the centre of the curriculum, with the goal of understanding a country’s experience within a regional and continental framework and with other courses to compare and contrast experiences in a global world.’ Such a wide-angled approach would also act as an antidote to one of the dangers of an overemphasis on national history, xenophobia.

Predictably, the discussion which followed concentrated on the strengths and weaknesses of national history as exemplified in African historiography. Dr Shamil Jeppie (UCT) wondered about the suitability of a national history framework when it came to writing about states which spanned what later became national boundaries (e.g. Sokoto or the Almoravid Empire). Historians (and their students in particular) needed to be alive to the flaws in purported national histories which were in fact little more than the histories of one dominant group in the state, masquerading as national history (for example, Holt’s history of the Sudan which inordinately privileged the Muslim North, or histories of Ethiopia which were really histories of the Amhara). To these, Dr Maanda Mulaudzi (UCT) added a local example of historians presenting part as the whole: the depiction of Soweto as the norm of black South African experience from the 1970s, which ignored the very different processes then at work in rural South Africa.

On this point Professor Patrick Harries (University of Basle) referred to the way in which some French historians in the 1970s had re-conceived the national history of France from the bottom up as it were, with their point of departure being how local communities had thought of France. Perhaps this patchwork quilt of different takes on the nation was a model for historians of African countries to follow.

As necessary to deconstruct as these top-down, synecdochial national histories, observed Jeppie, were uncritical nationalist histories which portrayed the triumphant making of a nation as the predestined outcome of complex and often contradictory processes, to the exclusion of all other possibilities. As Professor Nelly Hanna of the American University of Cairo remarked: 'We need to distinguish between national history and nationalistic history.'

Several speakers interrogated the need for national history to recognise the existence of disparate local identities, and not to try to homogenise them by depicting national history as the history of a single, monolithic nation. Histories of these distinct communities should rather become the building blocks for all-embracing national histories. As an example of these, Dr David Gordon (University of Maryland) pointed to the existence in Zambia of popular vernacular histories of particular ethnic groups, written in local languages by 'organic intellectuals'. Not surprisingly, however, these had generally been ignored by historians in the academy.

Unlike in most other sessions, the South African experience was not much to the fore in this session. Professor Albert Grundlingh (University of Stellenbosch) did suggest that the glaring lack of a scholarly, Africanist national history of South Africa might be the result of the challenges to the very concept of national history posed by postmodernism, the rise of social and gendered history, and a wish to close the door on a past in which national history had been closely tied to an apartheid agenda. South Africa was perhaps as yet too fragile to conceive of a national past.

Yet, many agreed that in any national history, the national state and its conduct would necessarily loom very large, if only because it generated reams of records, the very bread and butter of historians. As a result, Professor Shula Marks (University of London) noted, history as a modern discipline had had a long history of a close association with the nation-state.

The other chief component of Falola's lead-in address, the relationship between national and global history, enjoyed much less attention in the discussion, apart from Marks's suggestion that global history might be imaginatively re-conceived in a way different from that which currently predominated in the world, as comparative national history, which would open up space for national history, but conceived of in an outward-looking fashion. To this, a smiling Toyin Falola added, more subversively, why not think of global history from the bottom up? That would alter what was seen in the kaleidoscope of history decisively!

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