

Book Review

Silences in African History: Between the Syndromes of Discovery and Abolition. By Jacques Depelchin. Dar es Salaam: Mbuki Na Nyoto Publishers. Distributed by African Books Collective, Oxford, UK, 2005, 265 pages.

Recent developments in historical methodology have revealed that to solely depend on empirical evidences and to keep aloof from other fields of studies could not make any sense if one wants to disclose the courses of events in such a way that the things that will be considered would come nearer to the 'truth.' That is why some scholars of history have given emphasis to the need to approach historical developments through interdisciplinary models. The proponents of such models have argued that other social science fields of studies would play a crucial role while scholars are embarking on reconstructing the past. In this respect the author draws attention, besides other social science fields of studies, to literary works like novels and poetry as essential instruments with which silences could possibly be unveiled (193-194). Of particular importance is his firm conviction on the need to acknowledge silences as facts and using them systematically in approaching the history of Africa.

This book, which gives us a new reorientation towards approaching the history of Africa, has many strong sides. The major strength of the book lies on its ability to reveal the instruments imposed by western and American world capitalist system by which important historical developments have been downplayed. With his sharp thought and sarcastic pen, he depicts the political, ideological, economic, academic, and ethical instruments of erasures which primarily geared towards their advantage, fog the direct connection between slavery and Atlantic slavery and colonial plunder with the development of capitalism and the capitalist system. Not only it reveals the erasure of the truth but also it significantly challenges the ivory tower approach of Anglo-American and to some extent western historiography. Regarding those Africanist historians who have been instrumental of erasure of historical knowledge, he said "swim against the current" instead of becoming mere supporters of those who coined paradigmatic silences (1). He portrays that the winners' history shall not dictate the rules along which historical research and methods will be developed in Africa (31-33). In connection with the paradigms of denial and affirmation of the African past the book clearly shows us how denial of African history before 1960 and reorganization of its past after 1960 is indeed denial when recognition is accompanied with paradigmatic silence (12). With regard to method, he came up with the notion of procuring historical authorities out of silence. This

is not, however, a shift from reading from books and archives to the sole use of silence, but recognition of silence as facts which have not been so far accorded the status of historical evidence (13). Depelchin argues that systematic search for the latent is essential so as to balance the story of the victors (22). His premise is the hunt for empirical facts alone is insufficient to figure out developments in their true color (28). Another concept that demonstrates the bravery of this Congolese author is genocide. In this regard he argues that concepts like the genocide, crime against humanity, and holocaust are not the repercussions of the Second World War. For him crime against humanity dates back to the times of slavery and most importantly with the times of the Atlantic slavery. This coupled with the policy of apartheid, the destruction and humiliation in the Belgian Congo, the assault in Rwanda and other erasures of genocidal magnitude were the things that keep the flames inside Depelchin with which he ravaged the center of colonial and capitalist knowledge production. Laconically put, he has got wit and courage to tell Africanist scholars the need to stick to the ethics of historical knowledge production (25-30). The reproduction of historical knowledge requires, among others, as the Chinese historiography tells us, life sacrifices. This is what Depelchin wants to instruct us by taking the self-suicidal endeavor of Patrice Lumumba, an immortal figure who defied the altruistic view of colonial or capital paradigm (75-76). He vehemently told them as he would never forget the multifarious traumas that slavery and colonial rule had brought to the Congolese and thus would never forgive. “It is still too early to forget” were his words. For which reason he was silenced shortly after Congo has achieved her independence in an obscured manner. With his death, substantial amount of facts was silenced (81-87).

His discussion of colonial anthropology and economics brings us to see how the destruction of the “inferior” ones during the Atlantic slavery could not be tabulated and could not be compensated in terms of monetary and financial terms as was the case with the holocaust of the Jews. Thus, it violates the tenets of comparative advantage or positive balance sheet, baptized and thus being saved in the life after death (128), and teaching the virtues of time and work with which the colonial paradigm aspired to blur reality by stripping of their historical context (109-121). Under the guise of improving Africans’ future, Deplechin tells us, institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund silence the very foundations of the capitalist system (slavery and colonial rule). In short, he defines the above institutions as centers of slow death (27).

Though unfair to cap the strong sides of the book this way, it is essential to point out the contrast between Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Armah's *The Healers*. Achebe's approach which corresponds with the colonial discourse met modest criticism while Armah's vision of the world of Africa takes central concern for him. The castigation of the author rests on Achebe and on the Africanist historians who, in the eyes of the author, were agents of the destruction of the world of Africa who shared the European vision of society. But in the midst of despair, Depelchin tells us, there are hopes in that healing will be possible from within, but shall not be entrusted to those Africanists and Europeans (160-171).

Simply not to elevate this book to the level of blameless status, I would like to point out three things as weaknesses. The first one is associated with grammar and choice of words. The book is not written with simple and plain terms. This is perhaps the major weakness as it poses, at least for the novice, an impediment in reading and comprehending what he intends to inculcate. Secondly there are unnecessary redundancies which remain to be boring to its readers. The other shortcoming of the book is that it fails to demonstrate those silences which could be used as historical authorities. This is presumably owing to his preoccupation with the instruments of silence.

In his attempt to analyze and examine the influence of capitalism on the continent of Africa, Depelchin employs relevant economic, ideological, ethical, and political theories. The major economic theories with which he tries to unveil silence in African history are the theory of Balance Sheet or Cost Benefit Analysis or Comparative Advantage. In this regard he powerfully and elegantly depicted how the traumatic experiences that Africans met, ever since the times of slavery to colonialism and then to global market, was far destructive than the so-called benefits that the Africans have got from such evils. For him, such destruction, be it in the times of slavery, colonialism or global market could not be even compensated in terms of monetary and financial terms. Above all he asserted that the economic, political, and cultural success of the capitalist system had its root in the Atlantic slavery and colonial plunder. So, dissociating the two will never make any sense if one is to tell about the "true" relationships of historical developments (55-63). The capitalist system has used several ethical and moral instruments of silence which Depelchin exposes it quite convincingly. In this connection we find the theory of 'Forgive and Forget' which cost the lives of many genuine Africans including Patrice Lumumba. Another interesting theoretical framework is the Altruistic Approach which claims that what had happened to Africa during the Atlantic

slavery and colonial conquest was to the advantage of its people as Jesus Christ came and was crucified to redeem the peoples of the world from their sins through His blood while the objective had been purely economic. The abolitionist theory which was considered as a philanthropic act is also used which Depelchin saves it from being downplayed by the abolitionists when he said abolitionist theory is all to erase the link between slavery and the Atlantic slave trade with the expanding world capitalist system (63). The concept of genocide is the other theoretical frameworks with which Depelchin tries to unveil silence. He has the conviction that concepts like genocide and crime against humanity could not be oversimplified by linking its start only with the Second World War. According to him such concepts have their roots in the Atlantic slavery and in colonial conquest. He castigates those who were reluctant to pronounce the genocide in Rwanda as crime against humanity for it interpreted as crisis in Rwanda (*Ibid*, 25-35). Politically we have the theory of domination and paternalism that tends to associate economic development and social betterment with colonial rule. Depelchin makes clear that the forces which had profited from slavery, colonial rule and apartheid sought to maintain their control by silencing the history of the victims. For him the history of the victims should not be written by exotic dominant models (56).

In terms of method the title of the book is self-explanatory in that Depelchin is very much concerned in how to systematically use silences as historical facts in the reproduction of historical knowledge without necessarily denying the importance of empirical data. Nor did he hides the pains with making silences speak particularly paradigmatic silences (10-11). Again, he uses a galaxy of secondary literature, approximately 417 books having direct bearing on the issue under consideration. In addition to using such a large array of secondary literature he has used funeral orations (231); made discussions with scholars (227); and has critically consulted novels to support his argument. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Armah's *The Healers* are the most important in this connection (159-164). Depelchin gives a good deal of rooms for oral poetry as essential sources of historical knowledge production. In this regard, he tries to analyze the importance of oral poetry in terms of their role among the Yoruba and Somali peoples (183-194). Besides, he consulted letters (175), reviews and the works of missionaries (174). It is also the conviction of Depelchin that the production and reproduction of historical knowledge should not be left only to historians. As a result he calls for an interdisciplinary approach. He believes that other social science fields of studies like anthropology, economics, ethics and moral educations and law; literary works like poetry, as described in the preceding pages, can play a great role in unveiling silence.

The writer gives us an immense contribution in widening the horizon of our historical knowledge pertaining to the history of Africa. It plays an eye-opening role for it demonstrated vividly the intertwined nature of the current capitalist world system with such evils as slavery, Atlantic slavery, colonialism, apartheid, genocide, and global market. He adds to our knowledge of the political, economic, moral, ethical, and academic instruments with which western capitalism distort the “truth” about Africa’s past, present and future. A thorough reading of this book brings one to better realize the human causality that happened during the Atlantic slavery, colonial rule, apartheid, and the various massacres and killings as unregistered and unrecognized genocides and thus help us know the historical roots of the concept of crime against humanity as opposed to the western notion that links its beginning with the Second World War (30-35). As students of history it is required to come closer to the “truth.” This is what Depelchin has done it with his elegant and powerful discussion of silence in African history. He vehemently exposed those pro-western and Africanist historians who distance themselves from the historical reality. This is a great lesson for us that we should acknowledge. With his writing, Depelcin brings us nearer to those institutions with which capitalism brings traumas on the peoples of Africa and gives us the opportunity to see closely what evils the World Bank and IMF have been doing on Africa (129-137). The chameleon like gesture of capitalism is also forced to stand naked. The change of its nature and gesture from one historical period to another is eloquently traced (170). This is another great lesson for the reader and above all for students of history. The methodological instructions that he came up with this work is also an interesting insight into our previous knowledge in this connection. The systematic use of a new sort of historical source, i.e., silence, adds to our mere dependence on archival, oral, and secondary sources. Silences as sources of information have not been accorded the status of facts hitherto. But now onwards they do. This is also a wonderful lesson that we get from this book. Our reorientation towards using other fields of studies like the other social science disciplines and literature in the form of poetry is reinforced by this prolific writer. Morally the writer advises us to show no fear and favor to the forces of reactions, even at the cost of our lives, to stick to the ‘truth,’ to boldly castigate those who, albeit they are our own stock, distort, muffle, and blur the correct link between historical developments, and if possible to try to unveil silences with which we can demolish the ivory towers. No less is the writer’s role in making clear the socio-economic, political, ideological, ethical, moral and academic approaches that are essential to discuss historical developments; their relations to one another through the course of time and the impacts they have incurred on either side. In this regard, we have got the chance to know

the theories of positive balance sheet or comparative advantage, paternalism, altruistic view, and the policy of forget-and-forgive. Of particular importance in this respect is the lesson we have got as the traumatic experiences of the African peoples during the Atlantic slavery and colonial rule, as stated earlier, could not be approached in terms of monetary and financial terms, and the need to not forgetting and forgiving evils of unprecedented magnitude such as slavery, apartheid, colonial rule and genocide. That is why Patrice Lumumba said “It is too early to forget...” and was killed in an obscured manner (85-87). That is why Mandela said “It is good to forgive, but we will never forget” and was awarded the Noble Peace prize. So, the writer is meant to alert us identify developments, past and present, in their true colors.

Wagaw Bogale, Bahir Dar University