PROFESSOR KENNETH ONWUKA DIKE 1917-1983: FATHER OF MODERN AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

BY

Nwosu Chukwuemeka Ph.D
Senior Lecturer
Email : barrchukwuemekanwosu@yahoo.com

Department Of History/International Studies
Imo State University,
P.M.B 2000, Owerri

The Prolegomena

African historians[1], professional training and ingenuity, indeed put them in a position to promote through our writings and teachings, the forces that may stimulate our people towards pressing forward the emergence of a truly Nigerian nation-state as well as nation-building. Professor Dike has contended that writing:

> *Is a great labour of love… the process of writing is like giving birth to a child because you are creating, so to speak; you are bringing something new to the world in terms of ideal*[2].

Thus, one of the major threats before the current crop of Nigerian historians, particularly at this point in time, is the inability of a sizeable proportion to intensify researches, and publications, unlike the 'old order' historians such as K. O. Dike, AdieleAfigbo, Jacob F. Ade-Ajayi, E. A. Ayandele, ChiekaIfemesia, J. C. Anene, ObaroIkime, Saburi Biobaku, Ebiegberi J. Alagoa, Walter Ofonagoro and Gabriel O. Olusanya- just to mention but a few, with a view towards promoting a better inter-group harmony, peace, general understanding as well as appreciation of one another's culture among our people for nation-building. Where researches and publications abound, historians would have succeeded in galvanising both the government and our people towards forging a better Nigerian nation-state given the fact that it is a multi-ethnic society or heterogenous in character. The person of Professor Kenneth OnwukaDike, as a matter of fact needs no introduction to historians in Nigeria nor those abroad because he was more of a primus inter pare. He has been variously described by historians, although his significance lies in the fact of being the: "Pioneer of scientific African historiography, ambassador of African history and father of the modern historiography of Nigeria"[3].

However, for the avoidance of doubt and for the benefit of those who do not know him, we shall pay attention to his biography, put forward hereunder;

Kenneth Onwuka Dike was born on December 17, 1917, to Nzekwe Dike, a prosperous intinerant traditional doctor and trader in Awka in Southeastern Nigeria. Dike became orphaned at a young age; however, as a result of his unprecedented academic promise which he showed, he was assisted with scholarship from the Anglican Church during his formative years. He attended Dennis Memorial Grammar School (D.M.G.S) Onitsha; Achimota College in Ghana; Fourah Bay College, Sierre-Leone; University of Aberdenin Scotland where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and finally Kings College, London, where he was awarded a Ph.D in African History in 1950. Infact, he was the first Nigerian to be professionally trained as a historian in the Western tradition.

Upon his completing his university education, he joined the staff of the then University College London, Ibadan, rising from a university professor, to become first Nigerian Vice-Chancellor, of what has since become the University of Ibadan. Between 1966 and 1970, Dike was roving ambassador for Biafra and was based in Paris. From 1970 to 1980, Dike took up professorship at Harvard University where he was the first Andrew Mellon Professor of African History, and Chairman of the Committee on African Studies. K. O. Dike, later returned to Nigeria to set up the Anambra State University of Technology (ASUTECH) which he head as its first president until his death on October 26, 1983.

Dike's Contributions towards the Development of African History

As a historian, his contributions towards the development of African historiography and the discipline of history are indeed enormous and he will always be remembered for his monumental achievements for historical studies. As a charismatic historical personality, K. O. Dike would always remain an enigma. He has been credited for the transformation of the history curriculum at Ibadan; and by making historical studies more relevant and more African paving the way for what is known today as the 'Ibadan School of History'.

He was also either instrumental in the training of our early professional historians or a teacher to most of the early Nigerian professors of history[4]. The prominent ones include Professors Jacob Ade Ajayi, Isaac Okonjo, Chika C. Ifemesia, E. J. Alagoa, TekenaTamuno, ObaroIkime, AdieleAfigbo, Sylvanus .J. Cookey, Adewoye and Dr. Adeleye, among many others. Accordingly, as

historians, we are acknowledging the vision, character and practice of Kenneth Dike as each and everyone of them has, more or less, credited his own formation to the "dazzling",[5]performance of Kenneth Dike as scholar-administrator in Ibadan. In 1983, T. N. Tamuno trenchantly put it as follows:

> *Ibadan's historic role as Nigeria's premier and pre-eminent University institution had much to do with Dike's early encouragement of postgraduate studies during his term of office as teacher and administrator. Dike had an indefinable way of spotting talent and encouraging it in every way possible. He gave his best to the world of learning through his scholarship and encouragement of young scholars as a teacher and university administrator. Dike's humility had an infectious quality among those in contact with him*[6].

As AdieleAfigbo succinctly pointed out in a challenging Dike's memorial lecture appropriately titled "African Historical Consciousness and Development in Nigeria", and alluding to the "Nigerian liberal nationalist historians and the men of materialistic conception of history, contended among other things, that:

> *It is not easy to establish an incontestable link between nationalist historical consciousness and nationalistic historiography on the one side and national development of the other*[7].

Against this backdrop, we firmly affirm that any historian, infact, any scholar, whatever his ideological persuasion, whose works do not contribute in anyway directly or indirectly to the remedy of the critical as well as specific challenges of his day does not deserve the description of an intellectual. The polemics here is to demonstrate how Dike's contribution to African history confronted the challenges in his work as a scholar, historian, university administrator as well as building an economic bridge across history in his book, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830-1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria*.

Dike's most significant contribution to the world was his historiographic views most clearly stated in an early article entitled "African History and Self-Government"[8], which was a response to the charge that Africa lacked history because it lacked written records. In the said article, Dike argued for the integrity of African oral histories so long as they were used in conjunction with evidence from other sources.

From this time onward, it marked the emergence of "Modern African Historiography", as we know it today with the development of the multi-disciplinary approach to African history in which Dike used oral tradition in conjunction with archaeology, anthropology, as well as linguistic

evidence to reconstruct African history as well as test the accuracy of oral tradition, passed down from generations to generations by specialized institutions. He also employed this approach in his revised Ph.D dissertation, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830-1885*, written in 1956 but not published until 1950; it aided in establishing his reputation as a historian, thereby earning the title, "Father of Modern African Historiography".

Furthermore, for Dike, history was a tool not only for discovering the past although, also for planning for the future. He used African history to justify the need for the African to be independent as well as to take pride in his heritage. He collaborated, for instance, with Senghor in staging the first World Festival of African Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Dakar, Senegal.

Certainly, his accomplishments ranging from institutions he founded to schools of thought he established, and methodologies notably for various research schemes, listed in his chronology of achievements, speak volumes for themselves. Some historians have referred to K. O. Dike as the "Copernicus of African History" -a pioneer in his field, an administrator par excellence, an educationist, and an African nationalist, a scholar in the true sense of the word as well as a spokesman for all African people of the world regarding the promotion of the African heritage and African self-determination. His achievements speak for themselves as well as go far beyond the realms of history. Indeed by whatever standard Dike had in the thinking and words of one of his remarkable students, Tekena Tamuno, as eminent academic and historian is his own right, is of the opinion that Dike: "Blazed an unmistakable and imperishable trail that has guided and illuminated that paths of great Nigerian historians dead or alive"[9].

However, conceived, and in whatever perspective, Dike was undoubtedly a 'physical embodiment of the theory and practice of African history'. Notwithstanding his profound influence and sagacity as a teacher who believed that students come to a university 'to read' for a degree rather than to be lectured into a degree[10], as is presently the case, it was his singular endeavour and brain-child that culminated in the formation of the Nigerian National Archives for the preservation of historical information for posterity.

In his doctoral dissertation published in 1956 and captioned,*Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria*, Dike viewed migration into the Niger Delta as a function of over-population as well as land hunger in the hinterland as well as a part of the trading in slave trade and slavery culminating in the emergence of communities which transcended the old ethnic entities. He further contended that:

> *The seaboard trading communities which emerged with this commerce transcended tribal boundaries, their history belongs both to Atlantic and tribal history*[11].

Similarly, Dike made emphasis on the ethnic heterogeneity or simply put, on the inter-mingling of the peoples of the Niger Delta, to the extent of asserting that:

> *…in the peopling of the Delta no one Nigerian tribe had monopoly Benis, Ijaws, Sobos, Jerkris, Ekoi, Ibibio, Efik and even the Northern Nigeria tribes were represented*[12].

Furthermore, according to Dike, this development produced polities, which would not indeed be regarded as tribal. In this respect, he argued as follows:

> *Moreover, city state is more appropriate designation than tribal state, since the period of migration disorganized the tribal entities and the slave further accentuated the mingling of peoples. In the 19th century, therefore, the Delta States were grouped not by considerations of kingship but by contiguity and in the period under survey, citizenship came increasingly to depend not on descent but on residence*[13].

He also went further and farther than Africanus Horton, to contest that position which obviously and evidently held by other scholars. Thus, in this respect he stated inter-alia:

> *The mistake of ascribing Ibo origins to all the Delta people was among 19th century writers. It can only be accounted for by the great influx of Ibo migrants which blurred the lines of earlier migrations*[14].

Aside from the aforementioned, yet another dimension to the personality of this scholar was that he was referred to as "The Liberal Natonalist Scholar". That Kenneth Onwuka Dike was a liberal nationalist historian, indeed, the father of the "Ibadan School of Liberal Historiography" in African history is no longer debatable[15]. As succinctly observed by AdieleAfigbo, this school:

> *Came into being at a time when the foremost pre-occupations of Nigeria were the winning of political independence from Britain and the construction of a Nigerian nationality out of the ramshackle colonial state created by Britain. At the time, hardly did anyone raise the issue of the character or quality of that nationality*[16].

It is indeed against this context and challenge aforesaid, that we should place the works of Dike. K. O. Dike's concern was indeed evident in his 1953 first unequaled intervention in the then widespread argument as to whether or not Africa had History at all. His three-part contribution captioned "African History and Self Government" published in *West Africa*, written in reaction to Dame Margery Perham's 1951 statement that Africa was "without writing and so without History", while Dike was a postgraduate student in London. Against this background, Dike's reaction was basically couched as a defense of the legitimacy and validity of African History as well as its challenges. He

rebutted the evidences of backwardness reiterated by Perham, drew attention to the extant Arabic as well as European documents and sources for reconstructing the history of parts of Africa, and emphasized the holistic and integrated characteristics of African conception of history as shown in the fact that the African:

> *Sees his past in the language he speaks today, in his music, his dance, his art, religion and institutions and finds it difficult to understand why what is so clear to him cannot be comprehended by others*[17].

K. O. Dike conceived his entire historical enterprise and acted with due sense of citizenship and patriotism which were even more manifest in his magnum opus[18]. Despite the flaws and weaknesses identified by G.I Jones[19], E.J. Alagoa, A.E Afigbo[20], R. Horton[21], and N.C. Ejituwu[22]. *Trade and Politics* has prevailed as a classic study of the Niger Delta, particularly of the Ijo. As a book, its reputation that revolutionalised African historical studies in perspectives, if not methodology, remains unchallenged, a matter, which unfortunately we cannot delve into in our present context.

In 1999, in his National Merit Award Winning Lecture, ProfessorAdieleE. Afigbo identified three ways in which History as a discipline has been studied and written. The first he described as antiquarianism in which history is studied solely for the purpose of understanding the past in its own terms. The second is "enwisdomisation" which emphasizes history as important for "impartation of wisdom that is knowledge, understanding, balance and serenity" based on the claim that the historian has responsibility to the well-being of society". Third is the "Instrumentalist or interventionist mode" which conceptualizes history as "an instrument for engineering a brave new world"[23]. Furthermore, A. E. Afigbo contend that:

> *From the days of Professor K. O. Dike, the first professional historian of modern Nigeria and perhaps the most highly gifted and the most achieved, Nigerian historians have taken the second and third modes as given-indeed the only givens*[24].

Kenneth Onwuka Dike indeed laid the foundation for this historiographical tradition in the Nigerian nation-state. In the 1953 exchange with Margery Perham, Dike announced with glee that "every nation builds its future on its past"[25], thereby establishing a dialectical relationship between the state, society as well as history. History solidly based on impeccable scholarship, scientism and artistry, in Dike's construction, should also be a weapon for the struggle for identity, justice, emancipation, upliftment of a people and development.

E. J. Alagoa was probably the first to describe K. O. Dike as a "Cultural Nationalist". He stated inter-alia:

> *There is a cultural dimension to the building of national consciousness in which the historian can play a role; a role in which the life of Dike was a Nigerian model. In an age when such matters are placed in the back seat, it is the responsibility of historians, as men of culture and as members of the intellectual community, to proclaim the truth that wisdom derived from the heritage of history, and that the experiences of ages embedded in culture is an essential ingredient of national development*[26].

J. F. Ade Ajayi, the one historian other than Dike, has done much to draw attention to the cultural imperative of nation building observed in his tribute at Dike's passing on. According to Ayayi,

> *The nation suffers which has no sense of history. Its values remain superficial and a perception of success and achievement that transcends acquisition of temporary power or transient wealth. Such a nation cannot achieve a sense of purpose or direction or stability, and without them the future is bleak*[27].

Dike's capacity as a cultural nationalist is better appreciated through his effort in the creation as well as sustenance of significant national cultural heritage institutions. His first major exertion in this respect was the survey, recovery, documentation and preservation of existing and perishing government, Christian missionary, private and significant historical data. Dike was thus the first Director of the National Archives of Nigeria in which position he recruited and sent for requisite training of young Nigerian scholars such as E. J. Alagoa who would themselves sustain as well as extend his interests in these directions[28].

Also, K. O. Dike was responsible for the establishment of the National Antiquities Commission of Nigeria, which was influenced by his retrieval operations and visits to significant historical sites. The commission was to rescue, restore and preserve important historical sites and monuments as well as establish museums "for…enlightening our offspring about the priceless and limitless heritage of our fatherland[29]. He was the chairman of the commission for thirteen years.

Moreover, Dike started the Department of History at Ibadan- as a centre of excellence in African historical studies. Besides, Dike and his quality and qualified successors, made Ibadan School of History to become famous and viable not only for its quality teaching but also in addition for the rigour, variety, volume and the unprecedented quality of the research work they turned out. Seven volumes of the University of Ibadan History series, of which K. O. Dike edited, testify to high

quality standard of scholarship and "cogently and conclusively demonstrated to the skeptical the authenticity and viability of African history as an intellectual discipline"[30].

Dike was also known to have conceived, created as well as directed the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan, the first of its kind in an African tertiary institution. One among many intellectual cultural institutions K. O. Dike was involved in founding was our much cherished and celebrated Historical Society of Nigeria (H.S.N). The Society, founded in 1955, and thus one of the oldest professional scholarly associations in Nigeria, was intended to be a platform for the promotion of African historical studies as well as provide "a broad intellectual and ideological base for publishing a journal which would afford an opportunity for educated Nigerians and other Africans to write on African history"[31]. Subsequently, Dike served as the first president of the society, and until the 1980s, it was widely recognized as one of the most puissant and pulsating academic associations in the country. In 1956, the society's journal, Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria, was established and it provided a platform for the publication and dissemination of information relating to rich historical materials on Africa.

Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, K. O. Dike's insistence that African history must be the history of African peoples and not merely the activities of their invaders from Europe and Asia must be recommended. In other words, the only way to understand Africa and its past is to look inwards and not externally for the explanation of the historical process in Black Africa. Thus, we must reject firmly what is sometimes termed as the perpetual external dynamics of African history. According to K. O. Dike, in his admonition to African historians, "we must abandon the notion that African history is to be explained largely in the context of Africans responding to the impulse originating outside the continent".

That African history may seem uncontentious today is a mark of the pedagogic achievement of K. O. Dike and his generation of scholars, hence the sobriquet, "Father of Modern African Historiography". To conclude on K. O. Dike's role as the "Father of Modern African Historiography", we should allow that great historian whose admiration for K. O. Dike remains unequalled, J. F. Ade Ajayi,to voice his last words on Dike:

> *...was a distinguished scholar, a man of integrity, a highly principled educationist, a successful administrator, and a far-sighted pioneer, who helped to build several enduring institutions that have served and are serving the nation well*[32].

Endnotes

[1]The term "African Historians" is used throughout to connote professional historians who are Africans or of African descent.

[2]A. O. E. Animalu, "Life and thoughts of Kenneth O. Dike", Enugu, 1997, pp.661-662.Citation for an honorary degree, Unversity of Ghana, 1979.

[3]Sa'ad Abubakar, The "Challenges" of Nation-Building: Nigeria, Which Way Forward? In C.B.N Ogbogbo and O. O. Okpeh ed., *Interrogating Contemporary Africa: Dike Memorial Lectures 1999-2007*, (Ibadan: Book Wright Publishers (Nig), 2008) p.27.

[4]The prominent ones include Prof. Jacob Ade Ajayi, Isaac Okonjo, Professors C. C. IfemesiaTekenaTamuno, ObaraIkime, AdieleAfigbo, Cookey, Adewoye and Dr. Adeleye among many others. See also, A. O. E. Animalu, "Life and Thoughts of Kenneth O. Dike", p.86.

[5]J. F. Ade Ajayi, "Towards a More Enduring Sense of History" *Bulletin of the Historical Society of Nigeria*. Special Number, Announcing the death of Professor KennethOnwuka Dike (1984).

[6]T. N. Tamuno, "To the Late Kenneth O. Dike: A Personal Tribute" *Bullletin of the Historical Society of Nigeria Issue*, 1984, 24-25.

[7]A. E. Afigbo, "African Historical Consciousness and Development", Sixth Dike Memorial Lecture, 1995 in E. J. Alagoa, ed. *Dike Remembered*, (Portharcourt University Press, 1998), 135.

[8]See K.O. Dike "African History and self-government," *West African magazines,*in three parts, 1953.

[9]*The Guardian*, November 6, 1983.

[10]The prominent ones are Prof. Jacob Ade Ajayi, Isaac Okonjo, E. J. Alagboa, T. N. Tamuno, C. C. Ifemesia, A. E. Afigbo, Cookey, Adewoye and Adeleye just to mention a few. See also A. O. E. "Animalu, Life and Thoughts of Kenneth O. Dike", Enugu, 1997, 661-662.

[11]K. O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria,* 1956, 20.

[12]Ibid, 30-31.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Paul Love Joy, "The Ibadan School of History and Its Critics", in ToyinFalola, ed., *African Historiography*, Longman, 1993.

[16]A. E. Afigbo, "African Historical Consciousness and Development". Sixth Dike Memorial Lecture, 1995, in E. J. Alagboa, ed., *Dike Remembered*, (Portharcourt: University of Portharcourt Press, 1998, 135.

[17]K. O. Dike, "African History and Self-Government"*West African Magazine* in 3 parts, 1953, 251.

[18]K. O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830-1885: An Introduction to the Economic and Political History of Nigeria, 1956.*

[19]G. I. Jones, *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers*, London, 1963.

[20]E. J.Alagoa, "Ijo Origins and Migration" in *Nigeria Magazine*, Nos. 91 and 92; 1968.

[21]Afigbo, 1959.

[22]R. Horton, "From Fishing Village to City States: A Social History of New Calabar" in M. Douglas and P. M. Kaberry ed., *Man in Africa*, London, 1969.

[23]Nkporom C. Ejituwu, "The Political Economy of the Andoni-Bonny Treaty to 1846", in Yakubu A. Ochefu, ed. Oral Traditions, *Totems and Nigerian Cultural History*, (Makurdi: Aboki, Publishers, 2003).

[24]A. E. Afigbo, *History as Statecraft: Nigerian National Merit Award Winner's Lecture* (Okigwe: Whytem Publishers, 1999), 3-5.

[25]Ibid.

[26]K. O. Dike, African History…177.

[27]E. J. Alagoa, "Dike Remembered: African Reflections on History Dike Memorial Lecture, 1985-1995", University of Port Harcourt, for Historical Society of Nigeria, 1998; See Awe Bolande, "E. J. Alagoa: A Cultural Nationalist", in Nkporom C. Ejituwu, et al, eds., *History Concourse*, Onyoma Research Publications, 2005, 67-78.

[28]J. F. Ade Ajayi, "Towards a More Enduring Sense of History" *Bulletin of the Historical Society of Nigeria.*Special Number Announcing the Death of Professor K. Onwuka Dike, 1984, 17.

[29]See *Bulletin, Historical Society of Nigeria* Special Issue Announcing the Death of Professor K. Onwuka Dike, 1984.

[30]C. C. Ifemesia, "Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike, 1917-1983: A Funeral Oration", in *Bulletin of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Special Issue, 1985, 5.

[31]Ibid, 7.

[32]Ibid, 6.

[33]J. F. Ade Ajayi, "Towards a more Enduring Sense of History", 20.

Notes on Contributors

Nwosu Chukwuemeka is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History and International Studies, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria. He holds B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Calabar. He also holds a Ph.D in African-America History from the Department of History and International Studies, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria. He holds LL.B,BL degrees from the University of Calabar and the Nigerian Law School, respectively. A solicitor and advocate of Supreme Court of Nigeria, his research interest is in the areas of African Diaspora History and International Relations. He has contributed articles in book chapters and learned journals. A scholar of international repute.