

# **THE PRACTICE OF HISTORY IN AFRICA**

**A History of African Historiography**

**Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa**

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One of the three unique terracotta masks recovered  
from an excavation at the ancient settlement of Ke  
in the Eastern Niger Delta, Nigeria

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## Preface

The first flush of enthusiasm for the research and writing of substantive histories of Africa has waned in the west. Critical, even pessimistic, assessments of the oral traditional base of African historiography have largely replaced the earlier euphoria. Within Africa, university students, the rural and emerging literate urban communities continue to thirst after competent reconstructions of their history.

These essays offer a history of African historiography specifically from an internal African perspective extending back in time to Ancient Egypt. In addition, the essays attempt to present in outline, a history of all the different traditions of historiography that may be identified to have operated on the continent from antiquity to recent times.

An ambitious project of this type can go the way of comprehensive coverage. We have chosen the opposite route of presenting a framework of ideas only, which, we hope, delineates the shape of African historiographical practice. The object has been to create the base structure of a basket. Other practitioners must develop this base framework according to sizes and shapes as the basketry challenges them.

**Ebiegberi Joe Alagoa**

Choba, Port Harcourt

June 1995

## Acknowledgements

I should acknowledge all those who have taught me history, from my grandmother in childhood, through my teacher in village school, to university graduate school, but desist from naming names in this instance.

My students at the University of Port Harcourt deserve to be acknowledged for serving as captive audience to some of the ideas in these essays in the various courses in Historiography, Methodology, and Philosophy of History which I had to devise and teach. Indeed, they instigated some of the ideas through the questions they raised in discussion. Similarly, my colleagues in the Faculty of Humanities stimulated my thoughts at the Faculty Seminars at which some of the essays were first presented.

The formal research was begun during my year as Fulbright Scholar, courtesy of The J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board and the United States Information Agency, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1983/84, and the writing during a second period of five months as Senior Fulbright Scholar at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island in 1993/94. In the interval, I had the opportunity to reflect on issues and organize my ideas during three months as a Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst—DAAD—German Academic Exchange Service Visiting Scholar at the Frobenius Institute, of the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany in 1989, and another three

months as Resident Scholar at the Rockefeller Foundation Study and Conference Center at Bellagio, Italy in 1990.

I am grateful to the funding agencies and governments, and to the universities which generously offered me the use of their facilities, while I retain sole responsibility for the outcome of my research.

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June 1995

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