



History: The Usefulness of The Useless, 1960-2016

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ABSTRACT

“African History is nothing but barbaric gyrations in grotesque and irrelevant corners of the globe”, moreso, when the African enjoys untrammelled natural abundance from his backyard. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed unprecedented activities in African history: to quickly record the histories of African communities, especially, the so-called acephalous societies. This task fell into the domain of historiography. Departments of History became enamoured with recording the oral traditions of motley of African communities, which were disappearing or becoming circumscribed into larger, more economically viable and vociferous ethnic groups. This was a tacit reaction to the biases of western scholars and commentators and to hatred and intellectual ignorance against the Black people and their humanity. Our education authorities have unwittingly joined the fray by de-emphasizing the study of some disciplines, among which is history, in preference to the sciences. The Historian, cap-in-hand has gone into alliances with some “Pentecostal departments, courses and disciplines” which cannot be missing from a well-crafted historical studies programme. The commitment to historical studies has been thrown into the dustbin of history and along with it. This study attempted finding out the point at which the historian lost steam; and reasons why the historian now begs for an office space; and will in the nearest future, for income. That some commentators described history as “mere antiquarianism” cannot negate its study. This paper concluded that history is still germane to knowledge.

Keywords: *History, barbaric, antiquarianism, proscription, acephalous, centralized and historiography.*

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INTRODUCTION

History becoming endangered is our humanity under siege. For anyone to contemplate relegating history to the background in the educational sector of Nigeria is tantamount to national suicide. It is equally racist if it is a dropout of the political economy of globalization, perhaps, a conditionality given to the operators of our academic system.

It will be stating the obvious that there is a drop in historical studies. Yet, Falola [1] admonishes us to tread with caution while apportioning blames because there could be other reasons. It is true that there is a government policy that stipulates 60% allocation and admission quota for the sciences and 40% for the humanities; that there is inadequate funding for research and teaching of history compared to what happens in the sciences; that there are lesser numbers of admission seekers into the arts, nay history; the lack of job opportunities for graduates from the humanities; and the general apathy of the public to history.

This seems systematic as history dwindles in appreciation both as a discipline and a core-subject. Many observers, including this author, insist that history needs to be rescued from a natural death. According to Onwudufor [2]

Nobody can dismiss history as irrelevant given all that it has contributed to nation building and character formation. It has been quite unfairly relegated to the background in our recent post. The costly joke we cannot afford in this stage of our national development. The right time to question this unwholesome phenomenon is now and we must present the facts as they are and a proper evaluation placed on it. This will put us back on the right track of nation building and cultural re-orientation. We cannot afford the price of this ill-informed policy direction at this crucial stage of our national development.

It becomes pertinent at this stage to evaluate the roles of government and that of history. Falola [1] opines that while there exists such a government policy, it might not be the sole reason for the drop in the study of history. This is so

because when the British government made a similar policy it failed, as it could not “provide the space and facilities for that projected level of scientification” [1].

Highly modernist in approach, the study of such subjects as government at the post-primary level is in vogue. Very few students sit for history examination in the West African School Certificate. It has become leprous to be a historian. The historian suddenly is like a fish writhing on dry land. To engender its study, attachments have had to be made with baby sister disciplines, which hitherto sought for relevance consorting with history. We now have strategic studies, peace studies, propaganda, military studies and more relevantly international relations. All these “courses” cannot be absent from carefully programmed historical studies.

Stop press!!

American history is compulsory for all Americans no matter the course of study.

For one to argue that this is a neo-racist assault on the African personality cannot be unfounded. The problem with this assault is that it is indirect. Like on previous occasions, the historian, the black people, must again “spend countless hours responding to other peoples hate and ignorance” [3].

Africa: The Dark Continent?

The image of Africa was that of the ‘Dark Continent’: a people without history. Even when a semblance of history did exist, it was mere barbaric gyrations in grotesque and irrelevant corners of the globe. Africa was seen from diverse perspectives, depending on who gave the information, and what was derived thereof. To the early Portuguese explorers, Africa was a land of fabulous gold mines, while from the 19th century “Africa was seen as a theatre of the blackest ignorance and crime where brutal slave dealers and tyrannical chiefs held sway over sullen and suffering millions in dire need of civilization’ [4]. The Hamitic theory gained grounds and made Africa ‘the Whitman’s burden’. Whatever was good was attributed to the civilizing influence of the white man.

It was easy for the historian to have a proper view, and be able to reconstruct the history of such ancient kingdoms as the Ashanti, Mali, and Oyo, to mention but a few, who had traditional chroniclers. These were the custodians of the past histories of these kingdoms. When these are placed side by side with other sources, we are capable of drawing reasonable conclusions in African history. But confronted with the writing of the history of less-centralized African communities, without chroniclers or institutions that could preserve human activities, it dawned on the historian that more effort needed to be made, in the reconstruction of the histories of these peoples.

A certain degree of certainty could, however, be attained through the application of the interdisciplinary research method in African historiography. This method became necessary in order to solve the dilemma the historian faced in the post-colonial period and especially the paucity of materials available for research. Such disciplines as archaeology, anthropology, ethnography, ethno-botany (to determine probable origin of crops), sociology, linguistics, paleobotany, paleozoology, and physics (which were employed exhaustively in radiocarbon dating) were co-opted. It is this process, which considers the technique, philosophy and phenomenon of the study and writing of African history that is called ‘Historiography’ [5].

What is history?

This question would seem odd in view of myriad definitions of history. Some would rather discuss it as a philosophy or a phenomenon. History is often times defined as a double-edged sword that could slash in both directions. To some, it is a child’s box of letters that the child uses to form any word he/she likes. The study of history has come a long tumultuous way that any definition cannot be attributed to an authority. Suffice it to say that its definition is gamut.

The definition of history is predominantly in its relations to the past. Generally it is defined as the study of past events. Recent events have shown that the “study of past events” tag on history immediately presents enormity of problems that the historian often is incapable of tackling. The scope of history, as a result, became so large for the historian to handle and therefore the need for a redefinition.

History is divided into proto-history, pre-history and history; and this categorization, with their discernible periods, still forms what is called history. It shows again that history is of considerable antiquity. Little wonder some scholars have defined history as mere antiquarianism.

It is a clear fact that the historian was, and is still, handicapped when it came to completely delving into the past: a problem the renaissance in African history was confronted with in the immediate post-colonial period. This was the time when the historian quickly needed to record the histories of many African communities. As mentioned earlier, the

historian could not go it alone and employed the services of other disciplines in the quest, at least for a better interpretation of data from oral tradition (orature) and archaeology. Archaeology has since been tied to the apron string of history. In line with the call for a unity of purpose, J. F. Ade Ajayi [6] contended that it is wrong to draw a line between history written primarily from written sources on the one hand and that from unwritten sources on the other. Moreso, history from whatever source needed to be handled with caution and expertise in questioning, analysis and interpretation [7]. This also depicts history as a study in probabilities, a social science and an inquiry.

While acknowledging it as the study of the past, students of history are inclined to emphasize this study as that of the past derived from written sources. Consequently, history has been defined as the study of *past events that are in writing*. This would mean that anything that is not in written form or derived from unwritten sources must be subjected to the technique and phenomenon of historiography. So, for the oral traditions of myriad of Nigerian communities, especially the so-called acephalous societies to become history, the data must be subjected to these techniques so that reasonable conclusions could be drawn.

History is anything in our past or even in our future that deals with human experience. In fact, history reviews and interrogates the past with a view to ascertaining the future. History is an inquiry - a scientific one at that. Like other sciences it starts from the unknown. The historian asks questions and tries to answer them. In "The Idea of History", R. G. Collingwood [8] stated that history is that which gives answers to questions we have already decided to ask. To him:

That is why all science begins from the knowledge of our ignorance: not our ignorance of everything, but our ignorance of some definite thing – the origin of parliament, the cause of cancer, the chemical composition of the sun, the way to make a pump work without muscular exertion on the part of a man or a horse or some other docile animal. Science is finding things out: and in that sense history is a science.

Collingwood [8] continued to posit that while history is an scientific inquiry, it has as its main objective attempts at answering questions about human actions in the past, *res gestae*. To unravel his objective, history proceeds to interpret evidence, which is a collective name:

For things which singly are called documents, and a document is a thing existing here and now, of such a kind that the historian, by thinking about it, can get answers to the questions he asks about past events.

In African historiography, especially in the so-called acephalous societies, evidence would include oral tradition, otherwise orature, and such other archaeological findings as material remains of people themselves (i.e. skeletal remains), dwellings and buildings, rubbish, fortifications, graves, religious centres, tools, weapons and adornments to even domestic utensils which have been preserved in the earth's crust for ages [7].

The purpose of history, as a scientific inquiry with *res gestae* as its objective, would lead to the establishment of a *raison d'être* for its position as a core and worthy human field of knowledge: a reservoir and repository of human knowledge. In the words of Mamadou Kouyate [9]:

I am a griot...master in the art of eloquence....we are vessels of speech, we are the repositories which harbour secrets many centuries old...without us, the names of kings would vanish into oblivion, we are the memory of mankind; by spoken word we bring to life the deeds and exploits of kings for younger generations

Emphasizing further the essence of orature as primary source of African history, as elsewhere, Kouyate continued:

I derive my knowledge from my father.... I teach kings the history of their ancestors so that the lives of the ancients might serve them as an example, for the world is old, but the future springs from the past.

The "future springs from the past" is the objective of history. The major problem of what history is for immediately comes to the fore. For many scholars of contemporary history, the lessons of the past have been learnt but how have we used the lessons to create a better future. In his "introduction to Contemporary History", Barraclough [10] discussed structural change and qualitative difference; and argued that:

We live today in a world different, in almost all its basic preconditions.... What are

the formative influences and qualitative differences which are the distinguishing marks of the contemporary era?

In terms of what history is for, which seems to be point at which history lost steam, Barraclough advocates that historical studies should be couched in a new framework and new terms of reference; but he is adjudged not to be alone in this contention. Yet, it will be worthwhile to attempt an answer as to what is history for? Although it will be stirring the hornet's nest, this paper will proceed with the input of Collingwood, which states that: *History is 'for' human self-knowledge. It is generally thought, among others.*

The debate is no longer centred on what history is for, but on what Collingwood has described as “progress created by historical thinking. He argued that history has had ‘good’ and ‘bad’ periods. These periods have occasioned illusions and dogmas. We are aware of historical cycles with their many theorems and positions, which are obsolete in present times. Moreso, we are agreed that history repeats itself spirally and not cyclically. Atoms can now be broken down into electrons, neutrons and protons. The Darwin's theory of the origin of species has become consigned to the dustbin of history by selective breeding of superior species, to even cloning. Wars were, and are still replete, but we have moved from the *intifada* to inter-ballistic guided missiles. This is history in action and in motion.

This paper seeks to unravel the trivialities surrounding the relegation of history, in particular, to the natural and social sciences some of which were tied to its apron strings. That the education authorities now emphasize the sciences is not enough to affect its studies and followership. This paper has given motley definitions of history, its objectives and what it stands for. The issue now is the need for the historian to be able to always make clear-cut distinctions between reality, dogma and myth. Inclusive in this problem is that of progress which according to Collingwood [8], as in the sciences and history:

Would consist in the suppression of one theory by another, which served both to explain all that the first theory explained and also to explain types or classes of events or ‘phenomena’ which the first ought to have explained but could not.

Geoffrey Barraclough [10] suggests that historians should thread unfamiliar or less familiar paths, be more aggressive and less presumptuous. According to him:

Historians of the recent past have assumed for the most part that, if they explained the factors leading to the disintegration of the old world, they were automatically providing an explanation of how the new world emerged.... This line of approach seems to me inadequate, in some ways perhaps even misleading. [The historian] shall be concerned ... with the new world coming to life than with the old world that was dying.

Continuing on the dynamics and progress of history, Barraclough said that:

One of the distinctive facts about contemporary history is that ... it cannot be understood unless we ... adopt worldwide perspectives; ... not merely supplementing our conventional view of the recent past by adding a few [new] chapters... but re-examining and revising the whole structure of assumptions and preconceptions on which that view is based. Precisely [he] suggests the need for a new ground plan.

The litany goes on and on. In his “Myth, History and Society: etc”, Toyin Falola [1] opines that history should transcend mixing myth with reality in its contribution to political and social re-engineering. Historians are better-off in league with the positivist social scientists who insist that through research the human mind can understand the laws which determine the inner workings of the human society and thus use them to engineer a brave new world.

State of Historical Studies: Post Independence Period

It is pertinent to review the state of historical studies before determining the level of its neglect, relegation and relevance in Nigeria. Consequently, many commentators have outrightly condemned government's inaction to the de-emphasis of history while some have advised caution preferring a survey in the quantitative and qualitative state of history and its study.

F. O. F. Onwudufor [11] is of the view that the study and teaching of history should be accorded priority. It is salutary to emphasize the sciences but it must be alongside the study of the arts of which history is core-subject. The deification of the sciences, even when History is a Social Science and pronouncements from government is a “death

sentence on some arts subjects ... especially history". As mentioned earlier, there has been deliberate withdrawal of funding by government. In the words of Onwudufor:

There is now a gradual but steady phasing out of history in some states in Nigeria in general and Anambra State in particular. Almost all the secondary school[s] in the state no longer offer history as a subject. Students have gradually shifted to government as an alternative to history. But we do know that government can never be a worthy alternative to history for obvious reasons. Even in some institutions of higher learning, the numbers of students that apply for a degree in history have continued to drop.

E. N. Ota [9] is of the opinion that:

History has an important role to play in Nigeria's search for national integration. Our education authorities should include teaching History in all levels of the educational system and as a prerequisite in refresher courses for leaders and policy-makers at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies and the Administrative Staff College. It is history that will enable our policy-makers and leaders to realize that in times past and even today, no community could survive in isolation of its neighbours

A recent survey made at Abia State University, Uturu [12] and at the Federal University, Ndufu Alike, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State [11], shows that those who were admitted to read history did not offer history as a subject in the West African School Certificate examinations. Regarding postgraduate studies, most of the students who applied for studies in history are non-history graduates. Out of the many applicants for the doctoral programme in history in the 2011/2012 academic session are non-history graduates. This is the crux of the matter.

While the foregoing is correct, Falola [1] cautioned restraint and sought answers in the quantitative and qualitative health of history. Itemizing official government policy regarding 40% to the arts and science's 60%; shrinking job opportunities for graduates of the humanities; and the general apathy to the arts of a misinformed public, Falola insisted that there must be other reasons for the drop in historical studies and appreciation.

Quantitatively, we had only the University College, Ibadan which offered history in 1958. But the country now has so many universities, colleges of arts and science and education, and all offering history. Admission of students into departments of history has equally increased since 1958.

Qualitatively, history is offered at the honours level in our tertiary institutions. Unlike in the immediate post-colonial period when European graduates of Imperial history taught history, there are now African experts in African history. There are in place, quality undergraduate syllabuses, moreso, with the introduction of Bachelor of Arts research essay. Evenso, history is taught by graduates of history in the secondary schools.

In a provision made by promulgation in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria [13], chapter II, 19(1) states that: Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels. That it is stated in 19(2) of the same constitution that government will "promote science and technology" cannot negate 19(1). Falola, went on to mention the heavy investment of government in the 1977 World Festival of Arts - FESTAC; the Nigeria Since Independence Project chaired by Professor Tekenna Tanumo; the expansion of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments and the National Archives; and also worthy of mention is the National Merit Award given to Professor J. F. Ade Ajayi for his achievements in nation-building and in history.

Therefore, the Historical Society of Nigerian, as an umbrella body should look elsewhere for the problems of history. It must evolve an action plan that would on the long run lay bare, and correctly, the status of history, its study and fortunes. Or is this, according to Falola, due to the "decline in the seriousness and dedication with which the profession is pursued".

The political exigency of our time has enunciated the get-rich-quick syndrome of the elite in particular. In an era of unbridled materialism and corruption, why would one bother so much about a degree in history when one would make more money as a politician, which is the surest medium to make quick money?

In their "History as Social Science", D. S. Landes and Charles Tilly [14] say that history specifically maps out trends and events of our past. History to them is apt at "...revealing specific precedents for social scientists to consider in

planning future approaches to our social problems. This is a call for attitudinal change on the part of the historian to assume a new role, which must stress themes in man's development as war, governance, population growth, sustainability and urbanization.

Tasks for History: The Way forward

From Thucydides of the Greco-Roman era; to the quest for a fresh re-orientation of history characterized by the Humanism of medieval historiography; to the 17th century Cartesian Discourses on Method which insisted that written authorities must be checked by the use of non-literary evidence; through to anti-Cartesian Vico, John Locke, Berkeley and Hume with emphasis on the reality of evidence; then the Enlightenment secularity of Voltaire against religion as superstition: *encravez l'infame*; Rousseau's Romanticism; the Kantian transcendentalism; Shelling; Hegel; Marx's dialectical materialism and positivism; Italy's Croce on the autonomy of history; the Industrial, French and American revolutions; and the discourses on human nature and human history.

History indeed, has undergone a metamorphosis. It has gone beyond the mere interpretation of data, dates and events. History must initiate moves and control in an era of inter-disciplinary cooperation, even with the sciences. It should reinterpret our national history shone of the biases engendered by ethnic and regional tendencies and rivalries that characterized colonial and post-colonial Nigeria.

In Africa, we have overcome the degradations of slavery; the deliberate ravages of colonialism, but presently trapped in the web of globalization. In an era of integration, the historian must play crucial roles in national and cultural identity. It should be at the forefront in evolving a Nigerian system to suit our own social and economic circumstances, instead of aping Britain and copying the American constitution. There ought to be the re-invention of the type of history that would correct the anomalies of post-Independence culture of greed, avarice, corruption and nepotism, which assumed such dimensions that political and economic stability has since remained a mirage. The greatest disservice of colonialism was to relinquish power to a minority elite class, which is a culmination to the excesses of the Shagari administration and the carnage of the 1983 elections.

While the British made the mistake of imposing their own system of government on Nigerians through the "Native Administration", history should revisit the most civilized aspects of our culture, social habits, social needs and our diversity and develop a homegrown democracy. The American Presidential System of government and democracy is outlandish, unprofitable and un-Nigerian. At best, it has created so much room for maneuvers and looting. Politics has become such a lucrative business that politicians incite peoples from their regions or ethnic groups against others in order to win elections and remain in power to continue looting. At the national level, according to Ota [11], our political differences mixed with religious intolerance and ethnic/regional chauvinism, economic development and national integration of Nigeria is still a mirage.

The task of the historian should include the evolution of a historical studies programme that will broaden and develop the mind of the Nigerian for the reception of social consciousness. It must be such that will create awareness and a sense of social responsibility. The absence of these attributes in the psyche of the citizenry is the main cause of all our social, political and economic problems. This is especially so after the granting of independence [15].

Without doubt, history has played strident roles in nation building, with the constituent elements of "national unity, cultural nationalism or cultural self-expression in art, music, dance, drama, language and literature [1]. History has contributed much to our territorial definition and collective identity, which forms the basis for consensus and our solidarity [16,1].

But inclusive in nation building is national development, which is indexed by the economic and technological advances in the nation. What possible role would history play in national development? That history's objective is *res gestae*, the past in the present; it can suggest how development in the future could be tackled. This emphasis on the past obviously makes history seem a study of the outmoded - in a progressivistic and developmentalist era. The emphasis on the present while drawing inspiration from the past would imply that history has exhausted its job. In a globalizing world, better and prevalent ideologies have been evolved alongside great technological advances. The emphasis is now and now, and a commitment to developmental needs.

An arduous task for history is the creation of national unity, not just a nation state. This will be achieved through the creation of the "right ideological and cultural climate" shone of myths and romance. In the case of Nigeria, Falola insists on "Needs to demonstrate the factual basis for our oneness as a people – a oneness that derives not from monolithic unity, but from unity in diversity".

The Historical Society of Nigeria should map out programmes for the evolution of a comprehensive Nigerian

history. While efforts have been made in this direction as evidenced in the “Groundwork of Nigerian History”, more needs to be made. At best the Historical society of Nigeria in partnership with the Federal Government could undertake the writing of a more grounded history of Nigeria via the geopolitical zones. The histories of so many Nigerian communities are yet to be recorded, especially where such communities have not produced a historian. Some of these communities will soon become extinct and totally circumscribed into larger and more vociferous communities. What with the onslaught of ethnic sentiments. History curriculum should be upgraded and revised in such a way that it could produce the quintessential Nigerian historian. A historian that could discuss and interpret our histories, without resort to ethnic tendencies.

History should tackle head on the “National Question”. This according to E. N. Ota [15] would mean:

The composition of the Nigerian State and the dynamic problem of how relations between the ethnic groups should be ordered in such a way that every ethnic group would have equal access not only to political power but also the equitable distribution of national resources. It also seeks to address issues relating to ethnic minority interests, citizenship, and local government.

Those who feel that the convocation of a national sovereign conference would expose the inadequacies of the prevailing national relations and resource allocation have politicized the “National Question”. However, G. B. N. Obiekwe insists that this is where the role of history becomes very important in the evolution of a national identity especially since after the Biafra-Nigeria Civil War between 1967 and 1970. There should be compulsory civic education so as to inculcate national pride and loyalty through citizenship education, which in turn would produce, committed political leaders and the tolerance of the traditions and cultures of other ethnic groups by Nigerians.

Some of the tasks for history have been, and are still being, tackled. We are agreed that history has a role to play. The historian should no longer wait to be ignored. He should partner with government and make his findings always available to them for assessment and implementation. There is required a comprehensive and sound knowledge of Nigeria’s history written without ethnic undercurrents, embellishments and myths. This history must emphasize her struggles and triumphs, which is a necessary tunic for national cohesion [15].

The relevance of history is not in doubt; but its vibrancy is dulled by the psychological effect of neglect. History is in a state of lethargy. While we admit professional indolence by historians, history still remains pervasive. Everything has a history. All the other disciplines have histories. The patient in a hospital has a folder for his/her medical history. History is the only discipline that has no history but a philosophy. According to Babs Fafunwa [17]: “History is to a people what memory is to mammal. A people with no knowledge of the past would suffer from collective amnesia etc”.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study painstakingly surveyed historical studies with a view to ascertaining its continued relevance and what went wrong.

The paper reviewed definitions of history and while the author postulated some. Even those considered as pedestrian turned out being meaningful. The objective of history, which is *res gestae*: an emphasis on the past for the present, further underscores the relevance of history. History stands for human knowledge, self-expression, national identity and solidarity. In the Nigerian case, our history must create a consciousness that will uphold our unity in diversity. These are what have been discovered in this study to be the *locus standi* of history.

That certain government policy has affected history is stating the obvious. Yet, how these policies have affected history remains ambiguous. Quantitatively, history has fared very well. More universities and other tertiary institutions that offer history in their curriculum have been built and the syllabus is constantly upgraded to include newer courses and in line with such institutions worldwide. The National commission for Museums and Monuments and Archives has been expanded. What with the colossal investment by government on FESTAC; and the National Merit Award to a foremost historian, Professor J. F. Ade Ajayi, on his contributions to nation-building.

While the issue of neglect is real, there is the problem of lethargy on the part of historians. There is a seeming lack of commitment to partner with government and articulate the myriad problems besetting Nigeria.

Nigeria exists today as a nation thanks to the contributions of history. Yet, some scholars, especially the positivist social scientists, think that history has not played important roles in national development, which is an integral part in nation building.

Ways to move history forward were suggested. These would be through chronicling, analysis and factual interpretation devoid of myth, a specific Nigerian kind of consciousness that would emphasize our oneness in diversity.

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