

History as a Vehicle for National Development: a Nexus for Nigeria's Unity

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Abstract

The relevance of the subject matter – history – in any given society is germane. History basically evaluates the dynamics of human societies in all ramifications. It houses the totality of human activities in the past for evaluation. Just as the memory is to the mind, history is to the society. Therefore, for a meaningful development in a nation like Nigeria, history as a discipline and concept is sine qua non in the road to national development. Thus, in terms of policy formulation, decision making among other topical issues on national development, it is important to resort to history for road map, Hence, the paper re-examines and revisits the relevance of history in the road to national development with particular reference to Nigeria. The methodology is thematic and interpretation employing historical analysis,

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Introduction and Conceptual Analysis

A good understanding of the culture of Nigerian peoples with specific grasp of the people's antecedents will greatly avert myriads of ethnic based conflicts, which have currently pervaded the system. Since political independence of Nigeria, the states had undergone turbulent conflict as they were confronted with the realities of national development problems in an unequal dimension. Indeed, lack of effective capacity to manage these backlogs of problems has continued to sustain this stormy moment (Adejoh, 2004). There is the need to learn our lessons from history to correct the imbalances inherent in the system. We must be able to ascertain our genesis, our present circumstances and a possible anticipation or projection into the future for cultural renaissance and national development.

Indeed history is a science of fact "made" by nobody save the historian. It is the break with nature caused by the awakening of consciousness and a long struggle of man by the exercise of his reason to understand. It is based on truth though always unpalatable but ought to be accepted, because the past has its beauty and its barbs (Carr, 1969). A people without the knowledge of their past would suffer from collective amnesia and would grope into the future without precedence to shape their course. It is only thorough awareness of the people's heritage that would allow them to make guided decisions.

The survival of any race or nation depends to a large extent on the people's love and respect for their social order. Such love is endangered by patriotism sustained through the study of history. Citizens become conscious of their civil responsibilities, their common loyalty and commitment to the social, political, economic survival, growth and development of their state through the study of the past. It is also through the knowledge of history that people, particularly younger ones come to understand and appreciate the background, culture, beliefs and traditions of others. Thus history becomes an effective tool for effective nation building (Nene Onye Kwelu, 1999).

In Nigeria, to be specific, knowledge of history can help the country to have a deeper understanding of the antecedents of her diverse peoples and culture. It is also expected to serve as motivating factors in the march towards creating institutions and the consciousness that propel a people to make progress. So Nigerians cannot afford to do away with the ideas, institutions and issues of how plural and diverse people can co-exist and find a common ground to make progress especially in this dense and competitive global community. History can help Nigeria to develop a national consciousness. History is more than just a study of the past. It is an exploration of change and the socio-political dynamics of human society. History has helped to correct distorted accounts about African past and it can also help our sense of discipline and experience and provide the intellectual support for the patriotism we so much longed for in this nation, thus, making Nigeria a better place.

In planning, antecedents are indispensable. For example, the issue of the constitution under which the country would be governed has been an issue that has generated a lot of heat. We continued to experiment with different models from American or elsewhere, yet most of our experiments have not quite worked well. Unless the constitution takes into account, the collective experiences and historical antecedents of the people it intends to govern, rapid development would continue to elude Nigeria.

Development in human society is a many sided process. It implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being (Rodney, 1972). So, we can rightly posit that there has been development within human society since the origin of man, because man has multiplied enormously his capacity to earn a living from nature. Development is a multidimensional process, which involved major changes in social, structures, popular attitudes and national institutions. It is also an acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality and the eradication of absolute poverty (Todaro, 1989). Sen, (1990) on the other hand conceives development as capacity expansion. According to him, development requires adequate empowerment of the state and the society such that they can adequately distill their complimentary responsibilities. Development requires an enhanced state capacity and institutional and government stability. This will ensure societal fulfillment in terms of the basic necessities of life.

The undertone of development is man and society and the capacity to build and sustain the material well being inherent in the society through a process of struggle. Therefore, if we must accept the above thesis, the Nigerian nation must be seen to have a reflection of common culture and understanding, common aspirations and sentiments and above all civil ideology (Odey, 2004). The present scenario of “statism” or “ethnicism” where state policies are decided along Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba sentimentality is wrong. There cannot be a Nigeria nation of equitable national development in that circumstance. That is why we have to embark on a national history project as opined by Odey (2004) so that we can reconstruct the existing corpus of ascertained facts and insist on one Nigeria that would be relevant in the new world order.

The Nigerian Nation: Its History and Lessons

When Nigeria became an independent nation in 1960, many did not understand the import of the event. Many men had spent the last drops of their blood in the struggle for self-rule. We have had Jaja of Opobo, Nana of Itshekiri, Attahiru etc, who had defied the British’s Maxim gun to resist their penetration into Nigeria. When they eventually did, they came in as “friends”, “missionaries” and “adventurers”. Gradually, as the British activities along the coast were becoming quite expansive and realizing the enormity of the resources inherent in this part of the continent, Lugard called for a charter of administration from his home country Britain. Subsequently, the British “created” Nigeria in 1900 merged the colony of Lagos and the protectorate of the Southern and Northern Nigeria in 1906 and 1914 respectively. This merger brought Nigeria closer to what we may call a participatory government because for the first time a 36 member Nigerian council was put in place (Audu, et al, 2005).

In between pre-and post independent eras, the various movements and political parties in Nigeria had clamored for the unity and corporate existence of the country to enable her to achieve purposeful national developments. The Nigeria Youth Movement, the West African Students Union, and the various political parties of NNDP, NCNC, NPC and AG had as their cardinal objective as the “development of a United Nation out of the people who inhabit Nigeria...”.

The principle of common nationality among the different elements in Nigeria was also expressed in the series of constitutions operated in the country from the 1922 (Clifford’s Constitution) up to 1954 (Lytton’s constitution).

Unfortunately, the dynamics of local intrigues and mutual disharmony that have enveloped the Nigerian nation since “creation” have left an indelible print of stagnation in all the spheres of the polity. Indeed, all the political parties formed at the pre-independent era and after independent exhibited tremendously elements of localism. For example, the NPC was an offshoot of Jam’iyar Mutanen Arewa, an Hausa cultural group; the AG was an offspring of a plan Yorubaism called Egbe Omo Oduduwa while the NCNC was a direct descendant of Igbo tribal group. This is a clear indication that all the political parties had no genuine agenda for the nation. They all appeared in principle committed to the course of the nation, but in practice, they were agents of destabilization and underdevelopment. It was the trend of the first republic political groupings that subsequent political associations in Nigeria towed. For example, the NPN, NPP, UPN, GNPP, SDP, NRC, PDP, AD, ANPP etc, were all formed along ethnic/religious divides. The non-broad based statuses of those political parties have always engendered conflicts, particularly having to do with resource control. The concomitant effects of this misnomer have left the people in penury of all sorts inhibiting national development.

There is one fundamental reason why Nigeria has failed to attain the desired national development. That is failure of successive leaders and Nigerians to learn from the lesson of history. Development cannot be achieved without history. Ayandele opined that for a better understanding of the nature of forces and processes of national development, there is need to grasp the nature and various nationalities in Nigeria. So, historical studies can

inculcate national consciousness, patriotism and sense of social responsibility. Certain historical elements like good neighbourliness, inter-group relations/trade, cultural diffusion, language, etc, should form the basis of national orientation, instead of Shari'ah debate, indigenship, resources control and other naughty issues that stunt development (Odey, 2004; Audu, et al, 2005).

The Necessity for National Development in 21st Century Nigeria

Fanon (1980) said "each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission and fulfill it or betray it...". Against the backdrop of this assertion, Nigerians must rise to their responsibility of developing Nigeria to a greater height. Like earlier mentioned, Nigeria is fundamentally bedeviled with problems of unity, managerial inability, ethnic balancing in the form of federal character, zoning, geographical spread, creation of more states and local governments areas, etc. Successive Nigerian governments have failed to solve any of these problems.

National development can be attained when all the common values, beliefs, and consciousness that will facilitate sense of belonging are internalized and institutionalized (Odey, 2004). Nigerians should embark on some basic centripetal forces that are capable of developing the country. There must be a measure of reciprocated harmony in the system. This is to say that ethnic regions should be prepared to engage in some level of interdependency whereby a region appreciates the potential of the other and be prepared to depend on such in areas of need. The oil producing areas; this will definitely engender harmony. There must be strict observance of social justice, integrity, discipline and goodness. These are essential ingredients of national development. When a nation lacks these ingredients, it shall loom in the backwaters of progress.

The necessity of Nigeria national development could also be hinged on effective leadership with commitment and patriotism and tendencies of harnessing the endowments of Nigeria for a purposeful and healthy living. It is my opinion that such leadership personalities would triumph. Negative tendencies like corruption, indiscipline and other vices that are antithetical to national development should be discouraged in Nigeria. When a country is unfortunately blessed with leadership who are greedy, corrupt, illiterate, arbitrary, and uncommitted, such a country would definitely beg for national development. It would surely have posing problems of nationality, unity and national question. That is why Nigeria today is enmeshed in this muddy water. Nigeria needs a patriot of divine inspiration who would help carry an ideology of national development beyond ethnic boundaries. This is because our continued existence in this state has a negative implication for our continued survival. There must be a drastic 'surgical operation' through vigorous re-orientation strategies for possible reformation.

The Nigerian system has almost collapsed. The populace has lost confidence in the leadership. Those elected have thrown their mandates to the dogs. The supposed democratic tenets have been jettisoned. The society is near anomie. That informed the clamour for a sovereign national conference (Okpeh, 2004). The recent national conference is a welcome development. Issues like nationality, ethnicity, citizenship, indigenship, minority and resource control, and several other burning issues are openly and sincerely presented and discussed. This has in a way charted a course for the nation. But the only fear regarding the national conference was the 'No Go Area' syndrome (oil, religion, statism etc). I do not believe that the Federal Government should restrict discussions on nation question. Virtually all segments of the Nigerian society are sick an urgent all round remedies needed to revive them. So restricting discussion to specific segment(s) is an indication that the Federal Government has no sincerity of purpose. Sincerely, national development cannot be imposed in Nigeria. Not even the citizenry can be forced to assimilate the tenets of development. It has to do with systematic orientation of the people's conscience based on conducive environment. This translates that national development can only be achieved through the consolidation of democratic deals.

Conclusion

It is sad to note that from the 1850 bombardment and annexation of Lagos-Nigeria up to the independence of 1960 and even the post independent era is still battling with the problem of stabilization and national development. The 36 months civil war in the country has not been able to rebuild, reconcile and reintegrate Nigeria. Rather the country is overshadowed with cultural ethnic myth based on illusion (Odey, 2004). If in the 21st century, Nigeria is still conceptualizing that North keeps the political power, the East controls the economy and the West the bureaucracy, then we have not learnt from History. The lessons from the autobiographies of leaders like Julius Nyerere, Tom Mboya, Mao Tsetung, Kwame etc. have not been learnt. So, Nigeria might continue to remain stunted in growth. For a healthy 21st century Nigeria, she must be working to concretize the ideology that stresses commitment, integrity, honesty, dignity, loyalty and above all the ability or wisdom to learn from past experiences so as to be able to amend the present circumstances towards a prosperous national cohesion.

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