



History as an Educational Instrument for Development in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

The concern of this paper is to explore teaching of History as one among the single-most potent tools for reviving educational sector, industrial development and consolidation of national integration in Nigeria. To achieve this feat, the paper takes its roots from the role of history in human development and some integrative structures; and how the teaching of history can bring about revival cum renaissance to eradicate mediocrity of any kind. The paper uses oral interview as major primary source as well as archival materials; secondary sources are also consulted. The study concludes that prejudice, pejorative, condescending and dehumanizing references to Nigerians and their indigenous traditions, or the outright tendency to deny them any history, are attempts at reducing them as human beings, by way of isolating them from their past, their inherent cultural, creative and developmental prowess as a justification for Europeans' domination.

Introduction

Nations require their citizens to be patriotic and united towards achieving a functional educational system which can better encourage all round development especially in the shaping of communities' priorities and the empowerment of the people which must be built, it cannot be imported. It has to be, domesticated. In other words, we have a collective responsibility to mold our own university system that can empower us. Rowse A.L. argues that:

One of the greatest advantages of history is that the subject grows with you from a very elementary stage to the cast refinement of ripe maturity and skeptical wisdom. Through history children come to know about their nations past and present. A sense of belongingness and complete

loyalty to a larger abstraction called nation then germinates and matures.¹

For many pre-literate and literate societies in the world history served and still serving as a dynamic reality. In these societies, history is one of the means of promoting human development, relations or cooperation and the understanding of, and respect for, the institutions and practices of the nation. Through historical inquiry, people offer explanations of the world as it is perceived and conceived by them as regard the origin of land and sea, the origin of the state, the origin of man, the bases of different laws (topography) and customs, the title of the society to its land, how and why the similarities and differences exist. Thus, S.O. Biobaku posits:

For humble folks, the history of the lineage or the tribe is involved in everyday life when a man acquits himself well. He is praised as a worthy son of a great ancestor in a moment of failure, a man is adjudged to be unworthy of his forebears. Then in cases touching land or succession to titles, knowledge of the past is often the deciding factor. In order to make good one's claim one must recall age old bequests or recite a long list of chiefs and establish one's link with them.²

The reality that everything around us that encompasses our environment is history aside, it can hardly be disregarded that everything about the creation and emergence of the earth is history. The explanation here by extension is that the world itself is a product of history. It could be concluded that history is the mother or source of all things that have come to be. This careful observation of historical consciousness as the source of other human activities; as instrument of education, as the root of developments, expansion and inventions has been carefully captured by V. D. Robert, as he posits:

History is the memory of human group experience. If it is forgotten or ignored, we cease in that measure to be human. Without history, we have no knowledge of who we are or how we came to be, like victims of collective amnesia groping in the dark for our destiny. It is the events recorded in history that have generated all the emotions, the values, the ideals that make life meaningful, that have given men something to live for, struggle over and die for. Historical events have created all the basic human groupings, countries, religions, classes and all the loyalties that are attached to these.³

¹ Rowse, A. L., *The uses of History*, Oxford: Hodder and Stoughton 1946, p.166

² Biobaku, S.O. (ed.), *Sources of Yoruba History*, London: Oxford University Press, 1973

³ Dawood O.Egbefo and Mayowa O.ABE, Traditional Festivals among the Benin People of Edo State Nigeria as Instruments of Intra-Inter-group Relations: Lesson for Nigeria, *Perspectives in History, Development and International Relations: Festschrift for Professor Ibrahim James*, Terhemba Wuam and Philibus A. Nwamagyi (eds), Department of History Kaduna State University, Kaduna, 2018

It should be noted as examined in this paper that, in historical orbit and consciousness of human development, there is an unending dialogue between the past and the present as E. H. Carr posits.⁴ It is this dialogue that constitutes a fulcrum which continues to provide a reference point for the activities of man. This has been succinctly described by Alagoa:

It is implied and means by nature that history is not just a record of past events; rather, it provides solutions and serving as bridge between the past and the present, shaping and reshaping everything that stands in-between and in turn standing as the last defence of humanity...⁵

History as the Last Defense for a Nation

Family supports its members with shelter, motivation, inspiration and support either directly or indirectly can be the last hope of the members. That is why parents unite members and instruct them on the participation in every activity emanating as a result of togetherness that symbolizes oneness of the family and basic ‘defense’ line of a people. It is needless to mention that one could be “broken” and defeated by targeting one’s family. When a family is in shackles, all members are in shackles. An adage in Yoruba posits that: *eni ba gbagbe Ile, ni se lo so apo iya ko* (meaning that whoever abandons home or family only plots suffering for himself/herself).⁶

When history is taken away from people, the measure of human is taken away from them. At first, it would be to deny that people from this part of the world had history by imposing on them foreign history, glory and culture. Sule Bello captures it well when he writes:

various prejudice, pejorative, condescending and dehumanizing references to Nigerians and their indigenous traditions, or the outright tendency to deny them any credibility, were all but attempt at reducing them, as human beings, by way of isolating them from their potentials as well as ‘convincing’ them of their inherent cultural, and creative past as a justification for westernization.⁷

Following the example of Greek and Rome, most European nations have their national epics, saga or ballads embodying bodies of orally transmitted folklore. Other cultures transformed their national historical traditions into sacred literature. Thus, the Christian Bible is part of the Jewish historical traditions as an account of the words of God to humanity through the history of ‘the chosen people.’ Similarly the Arabs pay great attention to oral traditions through the *Qur’an* sent

⁴ Robert, V.D.. *The Arts of Writing History* London University Press, 1986, p.36

⁵ Ajayi, J.F. & Alagoa, E.J. “Nigeria before 1800: Aspects of Economic Development and Inter-Group Relations”, in Obaro ikime, *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, (ed) Abeokuta: Heinemann Educational Bks, 1980

⁶ Oral Interview, Alice Abe, Trader (Retired) 84 years, Makurdi, Nigeria, 03/13/2018

⁷ Sule Bello, National-Building in Africa: An Overview of the Reality, Challenges and Prspect, *Being a paper submitted to the 10th Daily Trust Dialogue as a Guest Speaker on the theme of “Nation Building: at Transcorp Hotel, Abuja on January 23rd 2013*

down by the prophet Mohammed and the *Hadith*, being information concerning the prophet and its companions. The methods applied to check the reliability of Islamic traditions including the recording of chains of transmission from the Prophet, or a person who received the information from the Prophet or a companion. It is important to remember that the spread of writing is uneven all over the world and its late evidence or spread to one region is not a reasonable factor to justify that such region has no history.⁸ Philip Noss, a Linguist, takes an overview of the language and literature of the Gbaya of Cameroon, small as the group is, and simple as the scale of its political and social structure is, and concluded that the Gbaya had a strong sense of history. This is a refutation of the theories which deny a sense of history to culture without writing.⁹

One may not need to be “sweet talked” before accepting that all living creatures including both plant and animal have history worth studying let alone ‘a group of productive human beings’ characterized with elements of civilization like social interaction and integration, peace, production and government.¹⁰ The claim that Africa where Nigeria belongs is a ‘dark continent’, that has no history worth recording has actually compelled Africanist historians to dig into the African past and introduced to surface hitherto neglected facts about the glory of African kingdoms and empires, social, trade, and politics worthy of recognition from ancient past of Africa.

Just like many other societies in Africa and Nigeria, Tiv demonstrated a sense of high level of political advancement with their political structure that was formulated in a very democratic method where people were represented accordingly. Let us dare to say that the origin of democracy often traced to the ancient Greeks by the European writers is nothing but a distortion and myopic explanation. Going by the description and definition of democracy, Makar puts the discussion on Tiv political structure in a more related conduct and concept than the Greeks practice of democracy.... Even the ancient Romans only gave privilege to the patricians and denied the plebians and the slaves who were the major population in the Ancient Rome. The Tiv, after repelling the aggression of the Chamber who were the major threat to their expansion and peace, developed a more sophisticated society with a viable economy and social organization.¹¹

Nigeria’s Early Contact with Europe

First European Contact with Nigeria was in 1485 with the Great Benin Empire in Southern Nigeria. The first European travelers to reach Benin were Portuguese explorers in about 1485. A strong mercantile relationship developed. The Edo trading tropical products such as ivory, peppers and palm oil were exchanged with the Portuguese goods such as manila and guns. In the early 16th century, the Oba sent an ambassador to Lisbon, and the king of Portugal sent Christian

⁸ Sule Bello, National-Building in Africa: An Overview of the Reality, Challenges and Prospect...

⁹ Oral Interview, Sullo Bello, Professor of History, 60 years, Department of History. Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. March 2017

¹⁰ Diopka, S.A., Relevance of Stories, Proverbs and Riddles in Recognizing Cognitive Abilities of Benin and Esan Children: An Introduction Benin City Maxim Book Academy, Several pages, 2003

¹¹ Tesemchi Makar, The History of Political Change among The Tiv in the 19th and 20th Centuries, PhD Thesis, Department of History, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. 1975

missionaries to Benin City. Some residents of Benin City could still speak pidgin Portuguese in the late 19th century.¹²

The first English expedition to Benin was in 1553, and significant trading relations developed between England and Benin based on the export of ivory, palm oil and pepper. Visitors in the 16th and 17th centuries brought back to Europe tales of ‘the Great Benin’, a fabulous city of noble buildings, ruled over by a powerful king. However, the Oba began to suspect Britain of larger colony designs and ceased communications with the British until the British Expedition in 1896-97 which resulted in a weakened Benin Empire.¹³

A 17th century Dutch engraving from Olfert Dapper's *Nauwkeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaansche Gewesten*, published in Amsterdam in 1668 writes:

The king's palace or court is a square, and is as large as the town of Haarlem and entirely surrounded by a special wall, like that which encircles the town. It is divided into many magnificent palaces, houses, and apartments of the courtiers, and comprises beautiful and long square galleries, about as large as the Exchange at Amsterdam, but one larger than another, resting on wooden pillars, from top to bottom covered with cast copper, on which are engraved the pictures of their war exploits and battles...¹⁴

The Colonial Reports

From the beginning of the British rule in northern Nigeria in 1900 until the 1930, the British political or administrative officers were instructed to provide reports as a matter of policy on all the ‘ethnic groups’ in the area of their jurisdictions including information about the people’s local histories, customs, language, geography economy, markets and trade routes. The reports compiled had to pass through several hands and were subjected to bureaucratic trimming and in the process often lost their originality and genuineness. Furthermore, some sensitive issues that might embarrass the British administration were often not reported or inadequately reported. There were several other faults which mitigated the colonial reports. Some of these include language handicap on the part of the officers, lack of sufficient contact and understanding of the people’s social and political organization. The quality of information secured by the administrative officers therefore depended largely on their interest, ability and language in which they conducted their investigation. It is in respect of this that Makar among other Nigerian Historians in the book titled: *The History of Political Change among the Tiv in the 19th and 20th Centuries* delves into the originality and authentic nature of the Tiv political history before it was eroded by the ‘infusion’ of the British government. Makar unearthing the diversity of the

¹² <http://www.historywiz.com/benincity.html>, 12/12/2019

¹³ Dawood O. Egbefo and ABE, Olajide Mayowa, *Traditional Festivals among the Benin People of Edo State Nigeria as Instruments of Intra-Inter-group Relations*: ...

¹⁴ <http://www.historywiz.com/benincity.html...>

economic activities of the Tiv with in-depth research on how trading, with methods of engaging diverse professions such as: fishing, pottery, smithing, carpentry, leather making, mining, beer brewing, and animal husbandry, shaped this society, brought to fore an imaginary setting of the Tiv and Chamba wars, the changing political system, the religious factor, and the likes.¹⁵

History as Human Defense

Through history the society offers explanations of the world as it is conceived by it-the origin of land and sea, the origin of the state, the origin of man, the bases of different laws and customs, the title of the communities to its land, how and why it differs from its neighbors in its religion and customs among others. According the argument of S.O. Biobaku aforementioned, in cases touching land or succession to titles, knowledge of history is usually the deciding factor. In order to make good one's claim one has to recall age-old bequests or recite a long list of chiefs and establish one's link with them.¹⁶

It can hardly be disputed that everything about the emergence of the world is history. What is being said here by extension is that the world itself is a product of history. It can therefore be said that history is the source of all that has come to be. This observation of historical consciousness and as the source of other human activities, intra-intergroup relations or cooperation or inventions has been well captured by V. D. Robert, as already quoted in earlier part of this paper. Noteworthy is the fact that, in historical orbit and consciousness of the Benin and Esan, for instance, there is an unending dialogue between the past and the present. It is this dialogue that constitutes a fulcrum which continues to provide a reference point for the activities of man. This has been succinctly described by R.G. Collingwood in his submission that societies which retain in changing circumstances a lively sense of their identity and continuity are to be counted fortunate not because they possess what others do not have but in fact rely upon their historical consciousness.¹⁷

It is implied by nature that history is not just a record of past events; rather, it provides a bridge between the past and present, shaping everything that stands in-between and in turn being shaped by it. Thus, among people, on a continuous basis, it chronicles, investigates, explains and evaluates events as they occur. Besides the truth, it's only our understanding of these events that does not make us go adrift; the knowledge and re-enactment of them guide our future decisions in order to achieve individual, societal or national goals.

moment in our history to produce fully skilled manpower or knowledgeable technocrats for national transformation.¹⁸ Adamson, 1997, argues that the days of job stability (which some

¹⁵ Tesemchi Makar, *The History of Political Change among Tthe Tiv in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, PhD Thesis, Department of History, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1975

¹⁶ Biobaku, S.O. (ed.), *Sources of Yoruba History*,

¹⁷ Collingwood, R.G., *The Idea of History* London, O.U.P. 1956, p12

¹⁸ Adamasun, B. National Transformation and Industrial Development in Nigeria: The Way Forward, *Journal of Social and Economic Management, University of Jos*, 1997, Vol.11,6, p.6-8

Conclusion

The present interacts with the past. Ownership of land, customs and origins of a people are oxygen for economic development and national integration in the present. Furthermore, Developed nations of the world got inspiration and strength from the lesson, glory and challenges of their histories. History, therefore is the bedrock upon which development is laid. Even the sciences and technology education continue to build upon their history. Every scientific knowledge arguably derives from past discoveries. Relegating history which is the product of historical scholarship is as well relegating a sense of humanity needed for growth, expansion and development that form major attributes of humans.

Arguments which tend to deny that developing nation-states have history worthy of study are over-simplicity and often beg the question. The case of using barbarians to describe people from other civilization can be traced to the time of roman domination of the world, when Romans regard others, such as the Carthaginians as barbarians. So, the civilization ‘us’ and extra-civilization ‘them’ are a constant in human history. In view of the above, it will become an assault to claim that there was no history worthy of recording in African nations. Oral tradition and archaeology have proven to be more reliable and authentic to an extent compared to written sources due to the fact that very important issues sometimes were not documented partly due to the fear of such documents falling into the hands of an un-authorized persons. Historians therefore find it convenient to use both oral tradition and archaeology to dig into the remote past to unearth evidence of societies worthy of recording. In this respect the various prejudice, pejorative, condescending and dehumanizing references to African countries - among whom are Nigerians- and their indigenous traditions, or the outright tendency to deny them any history, were all but attempts at reducing them, as human beings, by way of isolating them from their past as well as dismissing their inherent cultural, creative, or developmental prowess as a justification for Europeans’ domination.

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