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HISTORY AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE IN NIGERIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM, INTERROGATING A STORE HOUSE OF KNOWLEDGE

By

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Abstract: All over the world, history is a worthwhile and enviable discipline. It builds the man and the society in democracy, industry, patriotism, loyalty, unity, autonomy, justice, egalitarianism, nationalism, service, transparency, dynamism and peaceful co-existence etc. But today, the waning interest in history as an academic discipline especially in the Nigerian secondary educational system is not in controversy. Presently, history seems not only to have been accorded low status, but given an inferior and neglected position among the subjects studied especially in the nation's secondary schools. In almost all Nigerian universities of today history has survived because it hides under the canopy of international studies, diplomatic and strategies studies. This paper has a dual charge before it. First, it tries to identify the problems causing the people's lack of interest in this "living" subject and famous field of study. Second it seeks to suggest ways of repacking the subject to assume its place, position and role in the country's education industry. The pedagogical defeats in imparting the historical knowledge to the learner, the vastness of the subject in the secondary school certificate syllabus, the official discouragement of the subject by some powers that be in the government of the land among others have been identified as issue killing the interest of the people in the subject.

Keywords: History, Education system, Academic discipline, knowledge, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's national policy on education is based on five main goals: the establishment of a free and democratic society; a just and egalitarian society; a united, strong, and self-reliant nation; a great and dynamic economy; and a land full of opportunities for all citizens. History as a school discipline to a large extent has the capacity to help the nation achieve most of these goals being a store house of knowledge which touches all spheres of the human life. The ability of history to play vital role in this direction depends, however, on what is taught, and how it is taught which in

turn determines the degree of people's interest in it. Henri Marou notes: "A historian is a missionary dispatched to the past to strike a hyphen between the past and the present", in Kalu (1990:2). Nnoli cautions that in this enterprise, the historian has to carefully and dutifully establish the organic link and unity between the past, the present and the future. This is because there is no understanding the present with the past isolated, nor predicting or visualizing the future without using the experiences of the past and the present. At this

juncture it may be necessary to enter into clarifications beginning with – what is history?

MEANING OF HISTORY

Defining history is a complex exercise. This is partly because of the differing understandings of the meaning of history.

Ifemeje (1988:2) defines history thus:

History is a body of knowledge about the past especially the past acts of man in society and consists of facts ascertained through honest inquiry, as well as inferences, interpretations and generalizations arrived at by the historian and is available in the form of true records on paper or in the memory of man.

Car (1961) in his own definition cautions and insists that the word “history” should be reserved for the serious process of inquiry into the past of man in society. To Woodrow Wilson, the onetime President of America, history is concerned only with important parts of the past. His words:

History is not a record of all facts ... it is a record of some of the facts selected for their significance, and set forth in such order and combination, with such touch realizing imagination, with such colour and life as shall cause them, if possible, to make the same impression upon us that they must have made on those who were actors in the midst of them. (Link (ed), 1971)

German idealists developed the notion of history as a meticulously researched scientific reconstruction of events (Lat – res gestae) in the 19th century. This viewpoint quickly lost favour because it seemed to imply that all historical facts are incomplete and because it presumed that all historical truths were included in written documents. They remind me of the tale of Humpty Dumpty, who was sitting on a wall when he fell and fractured into pieces. Because some parts were gone forever, none of the king's troops could have their own copies. To put it briefly, the historian reconstructs the past from fragments as a detective working to better the present and the future.

For many people, history is simply the chronicle of the past, whether recent and distant. This viewpoint led to the creation of chronology in antiquity, which is the timeline of events

compared to their actual times. However, it was quickly realised that historical events are not always based on facts. A story needs to be presented in an engaging, amusing, and instructive way.

Teggart (1973) sees and defines history simply as the narrative statement of happenings in the past. Nevertheless, we know that history cannot be interested in all that happened in the past or all that man has done in his social capacity. Okwudiba Nnoli on his part defines history simply as a living phenomenon. According to him, like all living forms, it unites the past with the present and the future. Its living characteristics are displayed by historical analysis when the pattern of its emergence from the past, thereby exposing causality and movement in its transformation, and thus indication its direction of development in the close of his Gifford lectures: “always in your present lies the meaning of history, and you cannot see it as a spectator, but only in your responsible decisions.”

As we know, all knowledge of a man about any particular thing on earth is knowledge of the past. Before the 19th century history was not developed as a distinct discipline. But following the 19th century French Revolution, people started looking for history, looking at history, and to find lessons in history. Then began the scope, methodology, language and philosophy of history and the sea of arguments over them. History by its scope and contents revolve around socio-political and economic developments in a state.

History for our purpose may be defined as an academic discipline or a branch of knowledge that concerns itself with the study of the significant events of the past systematically and analytically with the hope of understanding the present as well as appreciating the future. This brings us to another fundamental question – what are the values of history?

Values of History

It is beyond controversy that history is highly relevant and indispensable in all human societies. To Marx in his conception of history, history is essential in understanding and appreciating changing human realities. As he observed “the first and most important inherent quality of matter is motion”. By this, he was not referring to mechanical motion but to the ever changing

human society – more impulse, vital life-spirit, tensions etc. According to him, human society is constantly changing. To divorce this process of change from social analysis is to isolate the past from the present and the future, or to explain the past with little reference to the present and the future or to predict or visualize the future without using the experience of the past and the present. In such an analysis, there is very little indication of movement and causality. In essence, the past is relevant to the present and future for it provides an indication of movement and causality which the human society is all about. In essence, there is no understanding the present with the past isolated. Also, there can be no gainful predicting or visualizing the future without using the experience of the past and the present. It is an organic link which cannot realistically be broken. In essence, there is an unseverable unity between the past, the present and the future.

Marx's submission put another way is that it is history that gives the people the essential knowledge about the past, a knowledge with which they solve the problems that confront them in the present, and with which they shape the future. Also, that the past experiences of men who lived in past which history provides to people are very vital for socio-political, economic and cultural development of a given society. Marx concludes that a fact in social sciences as in humanities is a union of the past, the present and the future.

B. Olatunji Oloruntimehin stressed the ideological and deliberate use of history in African societies in his inaugural lecture, "History and society." In every sphere of existence, history has been utilised to connect the past, present, and future. History was lived and left behind; it was more than just an account and interpretation of the past.

The griots of the Mande or the Arokin of the Oyo (Yoruba) have an admirable historical ideology. For them, history served as a guide for the future, a tool for organising and interpreting individual and community experiences to provide understanding of the present, and a means of transferring and conserving culture. In these cultures, history functioned as a medium of political education and elite leadership training. Additionally, it promoted respect and appreciation for the customs, institutions, and people of the

communities. Their court historians were skilled orators who also understood history. Still, their prejudices were defined by their objectives. This viewpoint allows history to be seen as an ideology that may be used in a variety of ways, such as to acquire, control, dominate, legitimise, liberate, or forecast the future. Another possibility is a particular kind of memory that guides people, free from propaganda or cant, to the scientific reality of their situation. Eduardo Hooanert refers to this process as "re-animating the memory of the people so that it defines their social consciousness." Stated differently, the people's history serves as a definition of their social consciousness. Stated differently, history serves as the foundation for a nation's collective memory, which is then effectively utilised to domesticate the present and the future.

Further, the fundamental basis of the value of history is that we can only attempt to understand the world around us and venture into the future if we possess some degree of historical knowledge. This seems to explain why Fafunwa (1974) declared that "A people with no knowledge of their past would suffer from collective amnesia groping blindly into the future without guidance-posts of precedence to shape their course". The knowledge of the successes and failures of those who lived in the past help those who live in the present to know how to respond to the problems and issues that face them. It serves them the trouble of solving current problems of the society through trials and errors. This explains why Collingwood (1964:10) had this to say "the surest way to know what man can do is to see what man had done". Cicero the great Roman philosopher had earlier declared "Not to know what happened before one was born is always to be a child". Ifemeje (1988:11). Sharing the same view George Santayana states, "Where experience is not retained Infancy is perpetual" ifemeje (1988:11). It is commonsense that few if any important questions on Nigeria's national development be it social, political and or economic can be answered without seeking the help of history. Ultimately, the present approach to history has been likened to a jade that rejuvenates itself by the marriage of new partners. In essence, the interdisciplinary approach in the

current study of history has continued to enhance the historian's enquiry on the society.

To Ifemeje, the benefits of studying history are to wit. History enriches human experience, it increases our understanding of ourselves and others, provides the basis for useful generalizations, helps in the development of ourselves and others, provides the basis for useful generalizations, helps in the development of power of thinking and logical reasoning, enables people to develop the attitude of historical approach to problems, prepares people for the unforeseen, and encourages having confidence in man as an agent of social improvement. History also gives leadership and followership training, and warns every society about its future. It promotes national consciousness and national unity.

History in the Nigerian Educational System

In the Nigerian education system, serious attention is not paid to the study of history perhaps since independence. In Nigeria, history of course is considered to be among the least useful of the subjects studied in schools. As such, this subject has disappeared in the curriculum of most schools and colleges in the country. Presently, it is no longer a subject of study in Nigerian Colleges of Education. Also, history as a subject is not studied in Nigerian Primary Schools, and the Junior Secondary. In the same vein, it is not a compulsory subject at the Senior Secondary School level.

To a large extent, the study of history in Nigerian schools has suffered serious neglect and setbacks. Ifemeje (1988) in trying to explain the neglect noted regrettably that "some policy makers have had occasion to indicate their wish to discourage the study of history". In other words, some officials at the government hierarchy had tried at some point in time to discourage the study of the subject.

Also, the craze for science and technology believed by some policy makers to be the passport to national development and modernization appears as well to be partly responsible for the neglect of the study of history in Nigerian schools. Further, the fact that history as a subject is not a compulsory requirement for the study of any of the courses in tertiary institutions in Nigeria except perhaps history also accounts for the neglect. Some universities in the country have also

helped to cause history lose its relevance at the Secondary School level by offering admission into History Departments to candidates who did not study History.

Nnoli in explaining the current lack of interest in history as a subject of study noted that Nigerian schools deal with history – a living phenomenon as dead. As he observed, past events, situations and personalities in history are studied as if for their own sake. As such, links between these issues and the contemporary problems of the day are at best tenuous. When links are provided between past and present events, they are purely mechanical. In history, what is usually presented is a series of event and factors strewn together in a chain like formation. The only important link in the chain is time. Causality is at best ephemeral. The future is hardly ever made part of the discussion. In the absence of causality and movement in analysis, the link with the future is impossible. History as such becomes a dead phenomenon, a study of the dead. To the contrary, it posits that history is a living dialectical phenomenon since the present is conceived in the womb of the past, giving birth to the latter, and nurtured into maturity by it. This process indicates not only the various forces which constitute the phenomenon, but also the dynamics of their interaction. This affirms the unity of the past, the present and the future.

Repacking History for the Nation's Education System

For history to perform its role in the country – the enthronement of Nigeria as a great, dynamic, united, progressive and stable nation, there must be the repackaging of the subject as a field of study. Repackaging here simply means putting in a new form. The subject has to be repackaged principally in the area of its curriculum content and methodology. This is because there are obvious weaknesses in its instructional methodology and content. These weaknesses explain both the people's lack of interest and the inability of history as a living phenomenon to occasion a new dawn in the country's socio-economic and political development.

History teaching in the Nigerian schools should cease to be just passing of information, the giving or dictating of historical facts to the students. Its essence must be one of making the students

interact with the happenings in the past to gain new knowledge that can be used in solving their present problems; a knowledge that will help them plan well for the future. In this vein, every history topic to be taught in all institutions of learning in Nigeria should have its significance and relevance known and objectively stated. The teachers of the subject should not only know this, but must teach it in such a way that its relevance to the society is not lost at the end. This is not to say that the students should be indoctrinated or brain-washed by the teacher. One is only saying that the history teacher should guide the students in thinking clearly, critically, logically and purposefully to be able to develop positive and healthy minds capable of making the society a better place.

At all levels of the education system in the country, history teaching should lay emphasis on the significance of each topic, what the immediate society could gain or benefit from it. Therefore, in the repackaging, each history topic in the syllabus to be taught to the students should have its significance well articulated and objectively stated. This will help the students of history justify their study of history and explain the wisdom in their choice of subject or career.

We acknowledge here the disagreements and controversies even among historians whether or not history should be given ethnical treatment. While the modern English historian, Cheyney (1927) say "Yes", Ifemeje (1988) say "No" believing the ethnical treatment of history is "a very serious threat to the discipline". He argues that it deprives history of all forms of objectivity. According to him, when history is used to teach lessons, historical facts do not come down to the reader in their real forms. They are made to pass through and be coloured by the interpreting disposition of the historian. Although the arguments on this issue cannot be accommodated in this essay for want of space, the view of the present author is

That when the teaching and learning of history are fully and totally divorced from ethnics, a great deal of what the society hopes to gain in history will be lost. In Nnoli phraseology a dead phenomenon. In the famous Socratic dictum "knowledge is virtue" what is required for ethnical excellence and even good society is knowledge of fundamental ethnical values. Accordingly, Nigerian writers

need to reevaluate why they write, for whom, and with what intent?

Further, a thorough, committed and concerted examination of the Senior School Certificate Syllabus shows that history syllabus is crowded with too many items to be studied. The syllabus exposes candidates to too many historical issues. As such, the students are scared from offering the subject. They choose in its place alternative subject like Government, Geography, and Literature in English etc which appear considerably narrow in scope and less abstract. The present history syllabus for school certificate Examination demands that candidates study all aspects of the Nigerian history, including Nigeria and the Wider World: they are made to study as well the history of all other parts of Africa. Before the present syllabus was introduced, what used to be studied for the school certificate examination was history of West African from 1000 AD to present. Even then, it was still considered too vast.

Put succinctly, to make history draw students at the secondary school level, the syllabus has to be thinned down. Left as vast as it is, students shall continue to be scared. Let us remember that this is a country where only very few students are willing to work hard.

The so called "suggested Reading List" for the Senior School Certificate history syllabus is another area that needs urgent attention. Most if not all the books in the list are works published over 25 years ago. Although the books are still relevant as most of the issues discussed in them and the conclusions made are still valid, there is the need to up-date the list by including recent publications. Here is the need also to remove old ones particularly the one whose authors have not revised or reviewed for decades. After all, there are numerous, recent and very relevant history textbooks published by those who teach the subject today. Students will benefit more from such works because of the close relationship between their teachers' lessons and what is contained in such textbooks.

The foregoing calls are carion when we remember that it is from this level of education system that departments of history in the tertiary institutions recruit their students. In essence, when only few persons study history at the secondary school

level, historical study at the higher level is doomed.

Although the content of the tertiary school history as at present seem not to have problems, we call also for a change in its instructional methodology. Each topic of study should have a stated significance and relevance to the society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

If history is repackaged and given its proper place in the country's national curriculum, it has a lot to offer in moving the nation forward. Neglect of history in Nigeria has to a great extent been responsible for the nation's present socio-political and economic problems. It offers ready answers and solutions to problems that confront man in the present and shapes his future. It the inculcator of national consciousness, national pride and patriotism. To present all Welshmen continue to be stirred by the heroic deeds of Llewellyn, the 12th century Prince of Wales who first welded his people into a nation; Eibner (1972:12).

For Nigeria and Nigerians to reap the benefits of history; it has to be made a compulsory subject both in the primary, secondary and tertiary schools. History or the knowledge of history should also be made a compulsory requirement for the election of people into leadership position. Any aspirant to leadership in the country must master the history of the people he intends to lead for a leader is simply a link in the chain of a people's history. Therefore, the knowledge of history must be demanded from all Nigerian aspirants to positions of leadership in the country. The great world leaders avid interest in history and their obedience to it accounted for their leadership successes. Churchill was a diligent student of history. Abraham Lincoln's interest in history was voracious; Ghandi and Napoleon Bonaparte had an insatiable appetite for history, Felix Markham (1963:98).

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