

**HISTORY AS A CATALYST FOR NIGERIA'S NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT pgs 55-64****Ani, Uchenna S. Ph.D., MHSN**

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**ABSTRACT**

For post-literate, pre-literate and illiterate societies; from the earliest time up to the contemporary period, history has continued to inform, equip and drive humanity through the vicissitudes of life on earth. Pre-dating man and very much in consonance with time, history not only “breathe”, but constantly bequeathson the living innumerable lessons and a wide array of reasonable alternatives, thereby accentuating the minimization of faults and hazardous risks. The importance of history for the “Nigerian Country” in its strides towards catching up with the blazing 21<sup>st</sup> Century global developmental trends, is simply beyond textbook analysis. However, since history is simply larger than life, the study in trying to explain the pathological condiments that give history its identity and form, undertook the pains of examining the subject matter vis-à-vis Nigeria’s intended national cohesion and development through the multi-dimensional prism. With history, tomorrow has just began.

**Key words: History, Reconstruction, Historiography, Identity**

## **Introduction**

This discourse cannot easily flow without due consideration of what history really is. Attempts at giving meaning to what constitutes history, the nature and content of history and the proper definition of history may either miniaturize the subject matter or expose the great pessimism, ignorance and emptiness prevalent even in the psyche of many Nigerian elites. Since mere storytelling is not history, and because recounting of incidents in the past is equally not history, (Carr: 1961) declared that history cannot go anywhere if, in its study, we have no sense of the future. It is the history that stretches along the entire process, providing a useful link between the past, present and the future, rather than a mere dialogue between past and present. History is on-going dialogue between the events of the past and progressively emerging future ends. By implication, it is an aphorism to state that history bothers itself with the past, present and future circumstances in the light of their connectivity. Suffice it to equally say that the concept of history oscillates on an acknowledged stored essential knowledge, constantly fed through the interactive forces of the human society and the physical environment. Since every human draws from this common pool, and equally contributes in growing and sustaining it, everyone in one way or another is a historian. One must be cautious at this juncture in so much as the art of historical writing and consideration insists on strict compliance with the tenets of certain professional guidelines, hence all information must follow certain sequence before being adopted and classified as History. History is factual.

## **Why History?**

Since history has proved to be the repository of human knowledge which presupposes by implication in its omnipresent structure, whether irritating, dejected, derived, avoided or desired, remains as an existential force, acquired, stored and transmitted in each field of study, hence Environmental history, Marine history, legal history, military history, among others. Consequently, the importance of history to any nation stems from the people's need and attraction to credible and factual information, which when digested and synthesized, provides error-proof decisions and clues. The evolutionary transformations involved in the intricate process of nation building is simply driven by human knowledge and common sense. It is only in the warehouse of history that the necessary intellectual resource that would spur and project state-craft to the next level of development is embedded. The value of history is neither in its

exciting imageries and exploits nor in its 'boos' and 'woos', but in the convoluted intrigues and dominant manifestations of selfish interests, common sense, fact, skill, bravado and subtleness emergent and played out by man.

Rowse, an Oxford Historian has observed with great concern that:

*Great has been the conquests of natural science in our time – such that many think of ours as a scientific age par excellence. It is even more urgent and necessary that advances should be made in the social sciences if we are to gain control of the forces of nature loosed upon us (Rowse; 1962).*

The above observation is not intended to disparage the many milestone achievements of the technological and computer age, but fully aware of these marvelous and stupendous achievements, it is pertinent to note that 'we stand to perish by our scientific marvels if we fail to make advances in the social sciences and thereby use our scientific knowledge wisely (Eluwa, 1980:14). Dedicated towards studying both the done and undone human and environmental happenings of the past *vis a vis* the basic goal of the human society, history remains crucial as one of the pivotal social sciences to which advances should be made for adequate control of the vagaries of our natural existence. By unveiling what man had projected and achieved in the past, or at what and where he had failed, history can shed enormous light on planning and execution, particularly in the area of Nigeria's national development.

At this juncture, this study deems it worthwhile to enumerate certain apparent benefits derivable from the study of history, before aggregating its many beneficial indices to Nigeria's growth and development.

- In its ability to equip one with an encyclopedic knowledge about the world, it bequeaths variety and colour, enriching environmental perception, orientating one with the bewildering currents of human diversity, such as that of Nigeria; it familiarizes us with variations in social forms and cures of a morbid dread of other cultures and change (Falola, 1989).
- Like a compass and guide in time-travel into the future, history provides hope and resolution with which to tackle the present and then the capability of demystifying the future, after all Collingwood maintained that 'the past which a historian studies' is not a

dead past, but a past which in some sense is still living in the present, and will indeed, continue to influence the future (Collingwood, 1969).

- Since judgement, sound reasoning, capacity for argument and clarity of expressions remain the major ingredients impacted by history, and applied by historians when interpreting and sieving his materials, it behooves then that these qualities, being not contestable as needful to national policy technocrats, clearly portray the ambience in history.
- While serving as a unifying factor in nation-building through unearthing and tracing the evolutionary growth and inter-group relationship that existed amongst the diverse culture groups prior to being fused as a nation, it not only inspires a sense of shared community and cohesion, but a true sense of patriotic national identity.
- The importance of history to both arts and the sciences is sacrosanct. It is only history that continues to harbor all theories, laws and practices, in the past, present and in the future, embodied as an educational process for engineers, doctors, pharmacists, lawyers amongst others, for successive generations, and impacted through the historical process.
- Towards avoiding the repetition of previous human or national mistakes, history in its provision of foresight forewarns, assures and guides towards progressive achievements propelled by strategic decisions. The mere fact that history is full of the examples of nations and communities who in the other hour of their confusion, resurrection and growth, looked back to their ancestors, their culture, for guidance and inspiration, acknowledges the great value in it.

Twenty first century Nigeria is bedeviled by enormous political, social and economic challenges which appears to be growing in leaps and bounds by the day. From institutionalized corruption, ethno-religious altercation, massive unemployment, poverty, heightened insecurity and terrorism, to governmental impunity and gross human rights violations, Nigeria appears to be on the precipice. Many governmental sectors, including the educational, health and the productive base remain in a quagmire. Operating largely on a mono-economy of oil and import-dependent, a comatose energy sector and highly insecure environment, potential investors continue to remain skeptical and aloof. Paradoxically, the largest economy in Africa, Nigeria's under-developmental regime has continued to portray it as the potential 'poor capital of the world' considering many global statistical indices. The caveat is that Nigeria's economy may be growing, but not

developing (Ezeonwuka 2014) Nigeria still lacks the enabling domestic infrastructure, the national unity, social consciousness, and the structural skeleton to propel and drive its federation and nationhood. There is a predominant eclipse of fraternal confidence, mutual distrust and suspicion arising from the differences in the many Nigerian pluralistic cleavages. So long as these primordial, parochial, and prebendal stereotypes continue to flourish in the national psyche, discrimination must continue to remain a disruptive wedge to Nigeria's national development. Cognizant of Nigeria's depressed economy, evidenced in the chequered gait of its political life, the prognosis appear poor. In the midst of massive national poverty, unemployment and perpetual grumbling, a silent and bewildered populace enjoys the criminal loathing of Nigeria's national heritage. Be that as it may, the six dimensions of governance coined by the World Bank as Governance Indicators Project, speak to the heart of the challenges Nigeria faces – voice and accountability, absence of violence and political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption.

Strengthening these six dimensions through exploring and exploiting the values and condiments inherent in Nigeria's national history, would help the nation along the path of recovery, growth and development. For the Nigerian federation to be able to robustly and confidently forge ahead on the path of development, originality, innovativeness, relevance, fair play and merit must be allowed to drive national engagements. These would in turn stir and sustain basic societal values needed for nation-building-integrity, honesty, justice, dedication, truthfulness and trustworthiness. Nigeria cannot continue to copy and implement certain incomprehensible and irrelevant alien politico-cultural values, while discarding and relegating its own to the background. Through the compulsory teaching of history in primary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria, history as the principal bridge between yesterday's and today's societies, could isolate certain pragmatic elements embedded in the various enviable pasts of the many culture-groups in Nigeria. Such fundamental values would drive continuity, change and development. Language, culture and values remain very important ingredients of a people's identity, and such can only be protected and transmitted through history, through such questions like – who are we? Where are we? What have we been doing since we got here? In making available past replica scenarios in all human and societal endeavours, opportunities for possible evaluation and amendments are created for better results, hence Nigeria's march towards national development would continue

to remain elusive without a conscious national integration and understanding, which vehicle could only be provided by history.

In reconstructing; whether through the archival materials, oral tradition, myths and legends, archeology, ethnography written sources, among others, history rehabilitates and restores decisive choice in human endeavours, providing always, reasonable alternatives. Adolf Hitler of Germany received his first defeat during the Second World War in 1945 sequel to the Russian winter, due to the fact that he obstinately failed to observe how the same ‘Russian winter made a mess of Napoleon’s 1812 invasion of Russia. In Nigeria, several governments have continued to engage in many developmental projects on yearly basis unsuccessfully due to enormous structural challenges. So long as the same pattern is adopted devoid of anticipated problems and eventualities on the way, veritable room for improvement and better results remain marginalized.

The same way kolanut lasts long in the mouth of those that cherish it, history pathologically imbued with its good and bad, sweet and bitter, remain the guiding light of great sovereignties like the United States of America, where there is a permanent chair reserved for a professional historian who advises the President. Yes, Nigeria can learn great lessons from the Apartheid interregnum in South Africa, the Rwanda genocide; yes Nigeria could beat its chest boldly for having participated actively in the ECOMOG operations in Liberia, and Sierra Leone; again Nigeria could proudly take credit of having successfully participated in several United Nations sponsored Peace-Keeping Operations. Undoubtedly, myriads of lessons and experience have been learnt and gathered by the nation through these engagements, but the product of such lessons remain a high sound nothing. Could it be merely another manifestation of Nigerian’s penchant and passion for foreign things and issues? Otherwise, how could one possibly explain the fact the country having practically experienced worst scenarios as portrayed in the genocidal Nigeria – Biafra War, the Maitatsine revolts, the unending Boko Haram imbroglio, the Kaduna, Zamfara and Benue killings, coupled with the Fulani Herdsmen and Farmers crisis, has rather decided to sweep these under the carpet as evidenced through cosmetic approach to national agitations and grievances.

## The way forward

Just as these challenges are cast and relayed through historical information, Nigerians are not only in pains, but continue to feel betrayed in their poverty and dilemma, sequel to the dysfunctional strategic silence in the national political behavior. The relevance of history in Nigeria's present quagmire must come from the interdisciplinary relationship with the politico-social, scientific and economic development of human society through follow-up information, evaluation and ethical projections, corrections and reforms. It is only through history which is replete with examples and incidents, that the ugly consequences of Nigeria's existential experience could be corrected, hence Agbodike postulates thus:

History teaches that if ShehuUthman Dan Fodio made possible the Islamic revolution which changed Hausa land from 1804, determined and properly motivated Nigerians of today can also revolutionize contemporary Nigerian Society and set us on the path to our desired goal, especially that of the economic recovery, welfare, progress and development of our rural areas. (Agbodike, 2006).

Nigeria's national policy should emphasize rather than neglect history, in order to terminate the peril the nation is heading to. That people learn nothing from history is only an aphorism which is only partially true. It means no more than that people do forget what they learn from history, or that they do not always fully appreciate the significance and meaning of the salutary admonitions of history (Ifemesia, 1982:2). By exposing the weak and the strong, the glorious and the inglorious aspects of human nature *vis a vis* the actions and behaviours of Nigeria's past leaders through reasoned judgement, history draws one by the ears and warns of the consequences of bad leadership, especially on the nation's youths, who may be leaders of tomorrow. In the same manner poor planning and execution under General Gowon and Obasanjo's regimes between 1976 and 1979 led to frivolous expenses in worthless ventures like FESTAC, preferring to neglect Nigerian rural areas in conspicuous underdevelopment, today the country is in for it in misery, hunger, unemployment and abject poverty, simply because the lessons of history were overlooked. Today, oscillating on a mono-economy of oil which is fast losing its value and relevance in the international economic system, Nigeria has chosen to remain adamant and deaf to all sincere admonitions towards economic diversification, even in the face of surmounting historical evidence globally. It is disheartening that even in the twenty-first century, Nigeria is still largely import dependent. It behoves on history as factual information to not only bear

sincere witness and provide clarity where elements of doubt exists, but provide equitable avenue for closure, reparation and reconciliation. American homogeneity and democratic greatness today hinges on its historic revolutionary war of 1776 and moreso on its Civil War experiences. On the other hand, the French still rely on the lessons and gains of its 1789 revolution. Fortunately, the above-mentioned countries still rely on and extract certain lessons resonating from these historic incidents of theirs. Nigeria is advantaged to have had such a theatre of history in the Nigeria-Biafra War, but certain sinister actors rather prefer to throw all that has to do with it, including its lessons and gains into the dustbin of history. It's rather disheartening to observe how the many ingenious Biafran technological inventions remain officially discarded and undervalued by the Nigerian government. Nigeria's technological weapon advancement, including the indigenous local variant in crude oil refining, among others, would have moved in leaps and bounds.

History is not intended to merely remind one of his miseries, but rather to provide a chance at a graphic and constructive assessment of past actions, hence providing avenues for alternative better future results. It is only history that can interrogate and unbundle Nigeria's terrible and metastatic colonial heritage. Though prognosis for Nigeria's national cohesion and development continues to look gloomy by the day, all hopes are not lost. In the midst of deep-seated distrust and suspicion tailored into the primordial psyche of the Nigerian core Northerner, and as long as this is constantly triggered through an umbilical cord tied to the London's Chatam House, the nation's quest for evolved choice and proactive development would remain a mirage. Empowering through historical information would simply evacuate prebendal and myopic cleavages and by so doing, catalyse Nigeria into the developmental arena. Constitutions guiding all countries are simply a piece of history which holds sacrosanct those countries' values and guidelines. Since the Nigerian constitution is an important chunk of Nigeria's history, and so long as dynamic change remain a continuum in life, history must continue to drive, motivate and roll like the sun, pre-empting and recording dreams and milestones in people and society.

History has continued to prove that ethnic/religious undercurrents command Nigerian elections, and when such effort at democratization marginalize freedom of choice and fairness, mediocrity is promoted, 'reciprocal distrust in inter-personal relations, mutual suspicion and frictions in trans-ethnic transactions and the eventual conception of electoral contest as inter group warfare



or battle (Kalu, 1986:23). History has consistently drawn attention to the fact that it is possible to blunt the edge of any problems created by the apparently bewildering diversity in our social system and experience. In the light of this, it teaches us that it is mutual ignorance that generates and feeds mutual distrust and conflict (Afigbo, 1982:1). By knowing the cultural background and antecedents of one's immediate and mediate neighbours, one could better appreciate their merits and defects, and so be disposed to tolerate them and thereby generate minimum friction and conflict (Ifemesia, 1980:34). In the valley of misconceptions and alienating primordialism and blatant stereotypes, intergroup ignorance has flagrantly persisted. However, history does not relent efforts in painting out that it is not impossible for these tenacious pluralistic Nigerian groups to achieve unity, not necessarily uniformity, at all levels of their political, social, economic and cultural organizations. Emphasis should be laid on those aspects that unite, hence; though they do not have a common indigenous language, they do believe in multilingualism. Above all, they do feel (or are beginning to feel) that they constitute a nation (Ifemesia, 1982:31).

Ifemesia goes on to reiterate thus on the national importance of history, through the following summation:

Man has from his very beginning learnt from experience, and has distilled and used lessons of history. Like every individual, every nation needs history and learns from history, at least as an anchor for its present and a compass for its future (Ifemesia, 1982:2).

### **Conclusion**

Belief in progress is constantly being propelled and motivated by memories of successes, the dreams of conquering new heights and leaving legacies, and even by inventing plausible corrections to why we failed where we did, hence every society remain poised towards dynamic consistency in transformation (developmental change). According to Afigbo, it is only history that can tread in the direction of mutual accommodation, patience and forbearance, common destiny and identity (Afigbo; 1983:15). In its inter disciplinary nature and structural context, history retains a manifest destiny in the development of human societies, hence its ability to prove through the assessment of the indices of development and governance that mere payment of workers' salaries and fixing of roads could rather than pass as achievements, be regarded as political campaign promises.

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