

The Importance of History for Nation-State: The Case of Nigeria

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Abstract

History is the systematic and analytical study of past, present and future event, the past events are the major starting point of history. Unfortunately Nigerian prefers to define themselves in terms of where they are going, not where they are coming from. It is in this light that this paper attempts to bring to the fore the importance of history in nation-state. The paper attempts to examine the neglect of history in the educational curriculum of Nigeria and also provides benefit of imbibing history in tackling national problems. The main

aim of the paper is to bring to limelight the value and benefit of history to nation building. The paper's methodology of analysis is secondary source materials interpreted using systematic content analysis. The finding of this paper reveals that Nigeria is suffering from the disease of nation-collapse because she lacks the sense of historical knowledge. The paper concludes by way of recommendation the benefit of re-introducing history in the school curriculum and consciousness of Nigerians.

Introduction

Throughout history, from the time of Socrates to our modern age, the human race has sought to answers to the fundamental questions of life; who are we and why are we here? Man has however endeavoured to proffer solutions to some of these unsolvable problems by seeking after the truth. And one of the major ways he has been doing this is by perusing facts about the past. Thus, history has been recognized as a source of enlightenment and development. It encompassed both an imaginative story of events and a narrative or chronicle of past events.

History now began to take on the distinctive sense of an organized knowledge of the past. The past events are viewed as a continuous and connected process. History sheds its knowledge of

the past, and becomes directly connected not only to the present, but also to the future. History in this contemporary era is seen as the product of the past which are not only active and influential in the present, but which will live on as imperatives, destined to shape the future in knowable or patterned ways. Its field of study continues to be potentially limitless, and it encompasses the totality of past human experience.

Thus, it is in this light that the paper attempts to examine the importance of history in nation building, with particular emphasis on Nigeria. We seek to argue that history has been relegated to the bottom of the ladder in the educational system in Nigeria and to advance reasons why it should be recognized as a key to national development. The main thrust of this paper therefore is to bring to the fore the importance of history to nation-state with specific focus on Nigeria. In bringing the potential of human action to the center of investigation, the dynamics of historical understanding can contribute actively to shaping our future.

The paper is therefore divided as follows; (i) Introduction (ii) Concept of history (iii) The Place of history in the contemporary Nigeria (iv) The Importance of History in Nation-State (v) Summary of the Importance of history in Nation-State (vi) Conclusion.

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Concept of History

History, as a word, entered the English language from the French formulation of *histoire*, the Latin notion of *historia*, and the Greek construction of *istoria*, each of which represented the basic sense of knowledge of the past. History is seen as the study of the past, present and future. The past event or knowledge is the main focus of history. Historians study the past event in order to know the present and be able to predict the future. Marxism and variants of socialist thought clearly defined history:

as a range of mass historical forces. In this systemic sense of history, historical forces are products of the past which are not only active and influential in the present, but which will live on as imperatives, destined to shape the future in knowable or patterned ways.

Another important definition of history is found in the words of the German historian Leopold Von Ranke. To him; "History has been assigned the office of judging the past, instructing the present for the benefit of the future ages". From these definitions, history sees the present in the light of the past and uses the past and the present to attempt a prognosis into the future. For this reason, the past is the best way to understand the present and to prepare for the future. This definition is also observed by, Okpeh O. Okpeh, who defines history as:

A venerable ramification of knowledge which generally studies the past activity of man in time perspective. It is an inquiry into the coded event of the past with the view of establishing their meaning and relevance in the present.

History simply denotes finding out about the past as something to value and preserve, as the only proper footing for a true comprehension of the society in the present. History connotes the systematic and analytical study of past events, in order to understand the present, with the panorama of predicting the future. R.V. Daniels, explains history in his book *Studying History, How and Why?*

As 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 identity. 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, die for. Historical events have created all the basic human groupings countries, religions, classes and all the loyalties that attach these.

Clearly, history enables us to understand the present through the illumination of the past, and this enables us to plan for the future. In interrogating the purpose of history, J.H. Plumb opined that history seeks to 'deepen understanding about men and society, not for its own sake, but in the hope that a profound awareness will help to mould human attitudes and human action'. In essence, the understanding that history seeks to deepen is that which will enable us mould human attitudes and action. These include human attitudes to science, technology and development. In other words, history is central to development. History is very fundamental and important to every society and there is an urgent need to imbue Nigerians with an enduring sense of history. As Professor J. F. A. Ajayi submitted.

The nation suffers which has no sense of history. Its values remain superficial and ephemeral unless imbued with a deep sense of continuity and perception of success and achievement that transcends acquisition of temporary power or transient wealth. Such nation cannot achieve a sense of purpose or direction or stability and without them the future is bleak.

As stated clearly above, the past events is the main vintage point of history, the past projects the present and the past and present in turn project the future, this have been grossly misunderstood and misinterpreted by adversaries of history in Nigeria.

The Place of History in The Contemporary Nigeria

Opponents of history argue that history poses no value to Nigeria. The question that begs for answer is; where does history stand in the Nigeria curriculum? What is the value of history in national development? Unfortunately our policy makers still find it extremely difficult to appreciate what development involves. Our Second National Development Plan 1970-1974 declared the building of "a united, strong and self-reliant nation" as one of the five main objectives of the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN), the authorities did not consider history important enough to be taught as a compulsory subject at either the primary or secondary schools or both. In addition to the above, the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) established seven universities of technology between 1980 and 1982, the Government has directed that in conventional universities sixty percent of undergraduate admission must be to courses in the sciences. Humanistic disciplines and the social sciences are to share the remaining forty per cent of the places. And yet history is unquestionably the most potent academic discipline for the inculcation of patriotism and national pride.

To answer the above question, history for decades, had no strong ground in the Nigerian curriculum because the governments of Nigeria thought the panacea in solving Nigeria's problem is through science and technology. So the importance of history in national development is relegated to the bottom of the academic hierarchy. However, history attempts to bring to the fore the salient and significant part of events that occurred in the past, which could be utilized in building a prosperous national future.

The Importance of History in Nation-State

To those who pose the question "what is the use of history? the crispest and most enlightening reply is to suggest that they try to imagine what everyday life would be like in a society in which no one knows any history. It is only through knowledge of its history that a society can have knowledge of itself. As a man without memory and self-knowledge is a man adrift, so a society without memory and self-knowledge would be a society adrift. Those who

ignore history condemn themselves to not knowing the present, because historical development alone permits us to weigh and to evaluate in their respective relations the element of the present. To support the claim above R. G Collingwood stated that:

History is for human self-knowledgethe only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history then is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is.

History is important and useful for nation building because it is the takeoff point to which society has to know itself and to understand the connection between the past and present, as well as foreseeing the future. In the same analogy, Niccolo Machiavelli also pointed out that:

Whoever wishes to foresee the future must consult the past; for human events ever resemble those of preceding times. This arises from the fact that they are produced by men who ever have been and ever shall be, animated by the same passion and thus they necessarily have them same result.

Consulting constantly with the past is for self-knowledge and to educate oneself continuously about the past to learn from those who came before him. It is only when we looked at the past, that we would be able to narrow our thinking to the present and to avoid future reoccurrence. Professor W. H Walsh succinctly declared that the major function of history in nation building is to "make men aware of the character of their own time by seeing it in comparison and contrast with another". It is our understanding of the past event that gives us a view of the processes that time has taken to bring us to the present.

Critics have argued that history only focuses on the past event which makes it a boring discipline and it is just a mental trick the living (historian) play on the dead. With this reasons, history has no connectivity with the present. Contrary to general misconception and opinion Okpeh O. Okpeh Jr, argued that;

Although it is true that history starts from the past, this is only in so far as that past is fundamentally related to the present. And the value which informs the quality of every historical reconstruction makes it contemporary. No matter how remote in time events thus reconstructed may appear to be, the history in reality refer to, and derives its meaning from present needs and present situations where those events vibrate. Thus, in history, life is empirically looked at backward (the past) and then discussed forward (the present) with the view of illuminating the future.

From this analysis one would understand the importance of history in contemporary Nigeria. As Benedetto Croce rightly put it thus, "All history is contemporary history". To further buttress our point all history of the past is history of the present, the link between the past and the present is the historian. The historian is a conveyor of past heritage and he studies the past in order to know the present. For one to really understand the present events he must first look at how, where and why it happened (past). So when one does not learn from the past, history is sure to repeat itself.

History as a discipline is under constant attack, it is also true that it regularly recovers, but not without wounds and imbalances, always difficult and sometimes impossible to repair. The lacunas are filled from time to time, opening up new lines of enquiry in fields in which all further research had been **considered** exhausted, but at the same time as these gaps are filled others are engendered. Even among men considered cultured it is easy to find some who know absolutely nothing about entire centuries of human history. The long thread of history is broken in many places. An investigation into this improbable, one could almost say abysmal, ignorance among the great majority of people would produce some strange surprises. History is very important to nation building, if only Nigerian leaders would look closely at hand and learn from their mistake, a better Nigeria would emanate.

History is very important to nation building. The reason why Nigeria is still lagging behind in terms of national development is because Nigeria forgot so easily where she came from and does not

know where she is going. The reason being that history had been relegated down to the bottom of the Nigerian educational curriculum. As Professor Alice Jekayinfa, president of the History of Education Society of Nigeria observed:

History as a discipline has been relegated in Nigeria whereas the discipline is the bedrock of any nation; and history instills patriotism and nationalism in the minds of citizens of any nation.

Thus, the study of history is very important in nation building, the appreciation of history in nation building has been shown in the observation of Nwafor Orizu who asserted as far back as 1944 in his book titled, "Without Bitterness" that unless we know what we are and how we came about to be what we are, we shall certainly be unable to know where and how to go further. Nigeria needs history in order to have a direction toward the road to development.

History is the mother of all knowledge known to man. There is virtually no field of study that does not encompass history. The assertion of Robin Walker further emphasizes the importance of history to nation building. As he puts it thus;

History is a vast umbrella subject. It encompasses all discipline, not just political and cultural history. It therefore includes literature, religion, the social sciences, natural sciences, arts, technology and mathematics. To be ignorant of political and cultural history of the people is also to be ignorant of the contribution of that people to all area of intellectual activity.

The importance of history in nation building has also been further demonstrated in the statement of Michael Omolewa that;

Without knowledge and keeping of historical events and issues, there will be nothing to build on. History is the foundation of all things; everything has a history, and knowledge is built always on example of one past event or another, it is thus a reference point.

For Nigeria to solve the present multifaceted developmental problem bedeviling the country, the past must always be visited. This is essential because if men of the future are ever to break the chains of the present, they will have to understand the forces that forge them. To achieve this Nigeria must be well endowed with historical knowledge which is based on recollecting, retrieval and reconstruction of the past. This is rooted in the fact that time past is part of time present and part of time future. In other words, human society is one long continuum and to appreciate the present, one must know what happened in the past.

History is the key to nation building. Society that wants to experience growth and development must embrace history. J. F. Ade Ajayi posit that; "society looked up to history for knowledge of the accumulated wisdom of the ancestor, the sense of value, the morality and the norms upon which society was founded". History should occupy a unique position and place in the Nigeria's society because it will bring in a new nationalistic and patriotic feeling. Marcus Mosiah Garvey, also values the significance of history in nation building where he noted that "a people without the knowledge of the past history, origin and culture is like a tree without root"

History is very significant in nation building because 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 Nigeria, history as a discipline and knowledge system is sine qua non in the road to national development. Thus, in terms of policy formation, decision making among other topical issues on national development, it is important to resort to history for a road map. As Nigerians, our destiny lies in our history, no civilization current or past has achieved any significant development based on rejection of its indigenous culture and history. He who controls the past controls the future, our view of history shapes the way we view the present and therefore it dictates what answers we offer for existing problems.

History is important in solving national problems and issues. The major reason why so much violence (physical and psychological) aggression, hatred, poverty etc, dominate the day to day existence of the people in Nigeria is that,

collectively, they lack historical consciousness. They tend to act or react based on the present situation and care little about the past. Due to the fact that Nigerian statesmen lack a proper sense of history, the politics of the belly and that of the moment dominate the polity. For any nation to develop, the collective spirit of the people must be well natured and propagated. This observation is captured in the words of Babatunde Fafanwa;

A people with no knowledge of the past would suffer from collective amnesia groping blindly into the future without the guide post of precedence to shape their course.

In a succinct analogical interaction between nation building and importance of history J. F Ade Ajayi rightly stressed that;

History interacts with the nation. For the nation is a product of history in the sense of historical circumstance and events; and therefore a nation cannot escape from its past. At the same time, the nation is shaped by the effort of historians, among other, who try to establish the history of the nation, influence its group memory and seek to define its nationality.

A nation that lacks history and clear self-identity and which is structurally incoherent cannot be strong whatever its wealth and amount of gadgetry at its disposal.

Summary of Findings

History is very fundamental to the sustenance of every society; it digs the past in the light of the present. For Nigeria to really understand her present predicament the study of history is important and the need to re-introduce history in the educational system and curriculum of Nigeria will be of great benefit. Below are some of the reason why we should study history in Nigeria.

History tells us who we are

According to Anyaoku, "without the knowledge of the past, there will be no fruitful projections for the future. The knowledge of the past is very vital to the

development of the country, and we can only solve present societal problems when we know what was obtainable in the past." History is a story of the past happenings, events and transformations. It is a depiction of what happened in the years since the inception of human race. Therefore history helps us to understand the origin of our existence. It helps us understand and answer such questions as who are we? Where did our ancestors come from? What was the society and culture like during their time? What did we inherit from them? What is it that we have to do to be like them? Thus, history helps us understand everything about our past so that we can build on it.

History helps us understand our Cultures

History is a deep rooted knowledge and study of the past. Given its vastness and the diversity that it covers, we can know almost everything that happened in the past and the then demography of any part of the world. We can learn the types of cultures and traditions people followed as well as their way of living. All cultures that we know of today have their roots in the cultures of the past.

History helps us Judge Wisely

History serves as a laboratory that helps us understand with the past. The past serves as evidence in our quest to know why people behave in a particular manner. Therefore, decision makers have to resort to history to make factual judgments based on the happenings of events and related facts. By understanding the past behavior, one can analyze the present behavior without bias.

History helps us understand Change

With a deep rooted study of history one can know best how people, communities, nations and the world that we live in has changed over time. Adamu Adamu had observed that the "Nigerian nation is earnestly yearning for directions most of which history holds the compass". Each person's view of the world is shaped by his/her individual experiences and the experience of the group he lives in. If a person isn't aware of the historical experiences of cultures and nations, he cannot fully understand need of changes and development that sweep a society.

Studying History Is Essential for Good Citizenship

A study of history is essential for good citizenship. This is the most common justification for the place of history in school curricula. Sometimes advocates of citizenship history hope merely to promote national identity and loyalty through a history spiced by vivid stories and lessons in individual success and morality. But the importance of history for citizenship goes beyond this narrow goal and can even challenge it at some points.

History that lays the foundation for genuine citizenship returns, in one sense, to the essential uses of the study of the past. History provides data about the emergence of national institutions, problems, and values; it's the only significant storehouse of such data available. It offers evidence also about how nations have interacted with other societies, providing international and comparative perspectives essential for responsible citizenship. Further, studying history helps us understand how recent, current, and prospective changes that affect the lives of citizens are emerging or may emerge and what causes are involved. More importantly, studying history encourages habits of mind that are vital for responsible public behavior, whether as a national or community leader, an informed voter, a petitioner, or a simple observer.

History Contributes to Moral Understanding

History also provides a terrain for moral contemplation. Studying the stories of individuals and situations in the past allows a student of history to test his or her own moral sense, to hone it against some of the real complexities individuals have faced in difficult settings. People who have weathered adversity not just in some work of fiction, but in real, historical circumstances can provide inspiration. "History describes the study of the past, a study not only of certifiable heroes, the great men and women of history who successfully worked through moral dilemmas, but also of more ordinary people who provide lessons in courage, diligence, or constructive protest.

History Provides Identity

History also helps provide identity, and this is unquestionably one of the reasons all modern nations encourage its teaching in some form.

Historical data include evidence about how families, groups, institutions and whole countries were formed and about how they have evolved while retaining cohesion. For many Americans, studying the history of one's own family is the most obvious use of history, for it provides facts about genealogy and (at a slightly more complex level) a basis for understanding how the family has interacted with larger historical change. Family identity is established and confirmed. Many institutions, businesses, communities, and social units, such as ethnic groups in the United States, use history for similar identity purposes. Merely defining the group in the present pales against the possibility of forming an identity based on a rich past. And of course nations use identity history as well and sometimes abuse it. Histories that tell the national story, emphasizing distinctive features of the national experience, are meant to drive home an understanding of national values and a commitment to national loyalty.

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to examine the importance of history in nation-building with special focus in Nigeria. History is very important in nation building and it is the lens to with society should study the present and to avoid future bitter reoccurrence of past mistake. But to our dismay history until 2017, had been relegated to the bottom in Nigeria's primary and secondary school. Nigeria had for a very long time turned its back on the past, and lost the benefit of historical knowledge. We prefer to define ourselves in terms of where we are going, not where we came from. It is quite unfortunate; the nation is quick to forget the role history played in the past and the continued need to deploy it in combating new challenges. History is important because it helps us to understand the present. If we will listen to what history has to say, we can come to a sound understanding of the past that will tell us much about the problems we now face. If we refuse to listen to history, we will find ourselves fabricating a past that reinforces our current problems.

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