

THE AHISTORICALLY MINDED SOCIETY, THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

*The term a historical may be understood to mean lacking in historical sense or tradition. This means in practice that the person or group of persons concerned do not exhibit in their thoughts and actions a sense or consciousness of their historical past and the influence it should have on those thoughts and actions. Man from the moment he became a thinking and reflecting human being, homo sapiens, has tended to refer to his past experience in deciding on his present and future line of action. He has, on the whole, tended to be guided the desired results. Hence the old saying that: *Experientia decet* (Experience is the best teacher or teaches) history, the embodiment of experience is a storehouse of guiding principles to and concrete examples of proper or wise human conduct. In deed, man did not always act by the guide of his past experience. This might be due to a number of factors. Firstly, the actor might be so blinded by the object of his desire or ambition, the desire to enjoy in the here and now, that he would not want to know of what might follow after. In other words, he would not heed the voice of reason if that voice dictated a course different from his cherished objective and his desired line of action. Another contributory factor is the assumption or belief that he, the present actor, might be luckier than those others before him who met with unhappy consequences. Another factor is faulty analysis of the issue at hand. This could arise from the intellectual shortcomings of the analyst, inadequacy of data relevant to the analysis or even external factors exercising undue influence on the analytical exercise.*

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Introduction

A Historical Behaviour: The Nigerian case, History and Historian's contribution to Ahistorical Behaviour and Towards Historical Mindedness.

Historical consciousness and action may be individual or groups. Since individuals make up the society and the individual cannot be separated from his society, we shall for the purpose of this analysis concentrate on the historical consciousness and action of the society as a unit. At the societal level there are still differentiations of the historical act, which reflect the level of societal development. Accordingly we shall differentiate between traditional and modern society, homogenous and heterogenous society.

Traditional society was by and large homogenous. In such a society historical consciousness was more pronounced, more uniform and more pervasive than in the so-called modern heterogenous society. Members of the society were more easily agreed on societal values, norms and practices based on the past experiences of the society: So also on societal sanctions. These norms and sanctions operated easily as it was easy to monitor the behavior of each member of a society that was relatively small and compact. Conformity, continuity and stability were the society's hallmark. Tradition, from which the society earned its epithet, enjoyed pride of place. There was change of course, but this was relatively peripheral.

To ensure continuity, conformity and stability society took historical education seriously and executed it religiously. Historical information was imparted by parents, grandparents, lineage heads and others, from the level of the nuclear family to the largest lineage group. At the level of the village, village group or even clan or state, as the case may be, ancestral traditions were transmitted by different agents such as parents, village heads, priests and elders, artists, leaders of various types of title societies. Historical education at this level achieved its purpose of instilling historical consciousness or historical sense and of keeping society intact and stable. Traditional society had historical mindedness or tradition as its hallmark.

With time, however, traditional society became heterogenous and its uniformity of behavior experienced problems. The society's tradition continued but it was now shaken by opposing pulls dictated by differing interests. Accretions of new groups – ethnic, economic, cultural, and so on – introduced the element of heterogeneity and involved a struggle for the dominance of one interest group over the other. Simple and small-scale traditional society, at first democratic and egalitarian, with time witnessed the emergence of the monarchical form of government. In the Igbo area such was the case with places like: Onitsha, Aboh, Asaba, Oguta, Osomari, Aguleri and Arochukwu. Later, there were, for example, the Warrior King, Ogbuanyinya Onyekomeli Idigo of Aguleri and Torti of Arochukwu in the second half of the nineteenth century¹. In Yoruba land there was the Old Oyo Empire while in the nineteenth century the area witnessed the emergence of Warlords like Momoh Latesisa of Ibadan, Chief Onafowokan of Ijebu and Chief Ogedengbe of Ekitiparapo who trampled on certain traditional values and practices. In Ijaye, Ibadan and Abeokuta new forms of governance emerged². Also, other Nigerian areas the monarchical system of government existed. Such was the case among the Ijo and Efik, the Igala, Nupe and Idoma. In Hausa land and Borno Kingship or the monarchy, had a long pedigree. With the advent of modernism, the problem of the traditional society was further compounded. Modern influences or forces – economic, religious, socio-political, cultural and others – produced profound results which destroyed the conformity of behavior, the cohesion and stability of traditional society. Although there were some continuities the changes were, however, such that they tended to overshadow the former. In the new modern society, heterogeneity and diversity, dissent and instability were its hallmarks. Different interest groups pulled in different directions. Agreement on an issue – a proposed line of action, a point of

view, a way of life, an institutional change, were more in the form of an imposition or fragile compromise than a consensus. In a situation of emotional or irrational argumentation and pulls in different directions a coherent picture of the past as a guide can hardly emerge. A generally agreed lesson of the past can hardly be reached. In such a situation it is each interest group to its own devices, values, norms, and sanctions, little wonder that the modern heterogeneous society tends to be centrifugal, divisive and confused, in deed unstable also.

At the level of the technological and Jet age society, the historical experience becomes infested with still greater uncertainty, divisiveness and disequilibrium. Here change is so phenomenal and breath-taking that one is at a loss to find the anchor sheet of past historical experience. In that society the traditional elders tend to know less than their children about the present – day world and state of knowledge. The elders are themselves dazzled by the changes, and feel they have no basis to enforce their values and way of life on their youth. The latter in their turn feel they do not have much to learn or inherit from their fathers and grandfathers. The picture, however, is not as depressing as it would appear at first sight. This is because the age-long tradition is still fundamental, resilient and persistent furthermore in the so-called new-age society the knowledge of the new-age youth is outmatched by that of the new-age educated elders who are in the majority among the older generation populace. Their experience finds a place both in the old tradition and in the new age exposure. By virtue of their greater accomplishment and exposure vis-à-vis the youth who are still in control, they still have a decisive influence in shaping the future of the relatively younger generation, to shape the present and the future for good or evil. The crucial question is whether this older generation will reach a reasonable consensus on what societal objective should be, what relevant lessons to draw from their past and whether they will courageously apply them to the building of a just, prosperous and happy society.

A Historical Behaviour: The Nigerian Case.

The Nigerian situation, however, does not seem for the moment to justify such a hope; In a brilliant public service lecture entitled “Continuity and Change”, Dr. Udo, Udo-Aka of the centre for Management Development, Lagos, made the point that we, Nigerians, “forget the past and start afresh all the time”.³ This penchant for discontinuity on “discontinuity syndrome,” as he called it⁴, mirrors a people without a sense of history, a people with lack of reference points in history. To illustrate his point he gave concrete instances of discontinuities in the Nigerian scene. According to him, planned projects and programmes in the public sector which were not executed during the tenure of office of those who initiated them, no matter how good and desirable, were more often than not abandoned by their successors in office. Uncompleted and abandoned projects abound in the country and they date back to first Republic. These range from expensive hospitals and other equipment to housing estates. The discontinuities also manifest themselves in frivolous change of street names, and even of personal names and dates of birth⁵. It is of course clear that these behaviours are costly in terms of energy, time and money, and most importantly in our disregard for the past, for continuity and for tradition. It is common knowledge that the advanced

countries have built on their past which they so much cherish. They preserve and cherish their monuments and street names, the older the more cherished and protected. They cherish and preserve their museums and parks, libraries, and archives in a way and to a degree we can hardly pretend to.

We are not calling for a slavish attachment to the past just as we are not advocating change just for the sake of change. Change there must be just as there have to be continuities. But when change comes, it should be warranted and justified change that takes account of the circumstances including the antecedents of history.

In our country the discontinuities litter also the political scene. Within fifty-eight years of her independence, Nigeria has witnessed eight successful coups. The change or discontinuity may be justified on the premise that the overthrown regimes were bad and needed to be changed. But when the successor regime is itself overthrown, it follows that the latter has failed to learn from the mistakes of its predecessor which means failure to learn from the past. Where a coup is itself unjustified then it becomes another instance of the uncalled for discontinuities mentioned above. Then it is a case of ahistorical behavior also. Our political behavior since after independence, particularly during the civilian era, has mirrored a people most of whom have a poor sense of history. There has been during this time unnerving recurrence of crimes and misdeeds of all sorts. Among these are ethnic chauvinism and bigotry; political thuggery, intolerance and persecution; election rigging, assassination and chaos; financial mismanagement, nepotism and craftiness; armed robbery, arson and murders; smuggling, currency trafficking and drug pushing. The catalogue is an unending one.

The situation is more perplex when a recurrence occurs close to the unpleasant consequence of an earlier misdeed. The situation is all the more depressing when there appears to be no end in sight to the dangerous drift in self-annihilation. As it is, one cannot help concluding that the perpetrators have learnt nothing from the pages of history. They behave as if the past is irrelevant to the present and future. There can be no better manifestation of an ahistorically minded group, lacking in historical sense, historical mindedness, historical tradition. Yet most perplexingly, this same group of people do not hesitate in the midst of their ahistorical behavior, to appeal to the verdict of history as the ultimate justifier of their action. Is this a case of meaningless parroting of a cliché to distract and to confuse?

History and Historian's Contribution to A Historical Behaviour

It would not, however, be a fair analysis of the situation if a look is not had at possible history and historian's contribution to the society's ahistorical behavior. This is because historical developments themselves and the historian's faulty analysis can generate in the people skepticism, cynicism and ahistorical attitude and behavior. In the Western World, for example, the twentieth century opened with great promise. Natural science appeared to be solving the last mysteries of the physical world while technology seemed to be banishing want and grinding

toil. The masses were gaining ever more freedom and a larger share of the good things of life. But the next half century was to prove the bloodiest and most violent five decades in all history, with two global wars shattering much of the world. World War I was succeeded by economic instability which culminated in the great depression of 1929-33. There was political and social unrest succeeded by a number of dictatorships notably Russia, Germany, Italy and Japan. There was disillusionment as men questioned the meaning of progress. Between 1919 and 1929 American production, profits and purchasing power had reached heights never before attained anywhere in the world, but by October of the latter year the American economy had tumbled.⁶ The economic depression was soon to be spread over the entire capitalistic world, mocking the phenomenal industrial expansion and improved technology and productivity of earlier years. Twenty-one years after the first World War, the world was engulfed in another global conflict more devastating than the first.

Probably it is in the light of the above apparent irregularities or inconsistencies of history's March that an eminent English historian of the twentieth century, H.A. Fisher (1865-1940), declared in frustration and disillusionment as follows:

One intellectual excitement has, however, been denied me. Men wiser and more learned than I have discovered in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I can see only one emergency following upon another as wave follows upon wave, only one great fact with respect to which, since it is unique, there can be no generalizations, only one safe rule for the historian: that he should recognize in the development of human destinies the play of the contingent and the unforeseen.⁷

Fisher sees in historical events no recognizable trend nor basis for drawing inferences or lessons. The very nature of the historical events themselves inclines one to reject them as a guide to action. While, however, Fisher may be right in asserting that there is no one plot, no one rhythm, no one pre-determined. Pattern in history he overstates his case if by it he means that there are no rhythms, tendencies, patterns or even repetitions in history, from which people can learn. We know that there are features common to the so-called unique events in history. It is like seeing unity in diversity, similarities in the midst of differences. It is the presence of these common features that enables us to draw inferences and make generalizations about human events. This is not however, to deny the presence of unforeseen, unaccounted for and unaccountable forces in history that invalidate our analyses and conclusions, the limitations of human perception and intellectual capacity that make those analyses and conclusions subject to error. By and large however, we can learn from observed similarities. We know that similar situations similarly handled, lead to similar results. This is the genesis of our almost instinctive reference to previous experience in dealing without present and future affairs.

A more devastating criticism of or is it cynicism toward history? Comes from Paul Ambrose Valery (1871-1945), French Poet and Philosopher. According to him

History is the most dangerous project ever concocted by the chemistry of the intellect.... It causes dreams, inebriates the nations, saddles them with false memories, exaggerates their reflexes, keeps their old sores running, torments them when they are at rest, and induces in them megalomania and the mania of persecution. It makes them bitter, arrogant, unbearable and full of vanity⁸.

Valery's indictment against history came in 1933 and was probably influenced by the Ominous events of the inter-war years the great depression (1929-33), the trampling of liberal democracy by the dictatorships of Russia, Germany, Italy, and Japan and the threat to peace by the aggressive acts of Germany against Austria in 1934 and in the Rhineland in 1936 of Japan against China in Manchuria in 1931-2, of Italy against Ethiopia in 1934, and the 1937 tripartite alliance of Germany, Italy and Japan against Russia and the non-facist world. Valery's cynicism, would appear⁸.

Justified in view of these developments, when however, it is placed side by side with the sober judgment of those who have tried to identify the value of history one is bound to accept his verdict with a grain of salt. His criticism is, however, a salutary challenge to historian and their craft. Outside intellectuals, scathing criticisms of history have also come from a laymen. An example is the one from Henry Ford (1863-1947). An American business Tycoon of the Automobile industry. To Ford, "history is all bunk".⁹ Apparently he felt that history and the humanities had nothing to contribute to the material advances of his time, to the material wellbeing of his people. To him science and technology with the attendant increase in material comforts provided all the answers to human problems. To the economic problems of his time, he thought he had found an answer in the payment of high wages, he did not need historians to tell him that. Ford expressed his self-congratulation and his cynicism about history in 1927. Only two years after that, the American boom came crashing down. In fact the United States depression turned out to be worse than its counterparts anywhere else in the world. Mr. Ford had failed to see that there was more to human events than mere mechanical calculations or tangible measurements. In so far as a better understanding of the strains and stresses of the modern economic system was arrived at, this was largely due to the work of the historically – minded school of economic thought led by the English economist. Lord John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946).

The historian's analysis is more embracing and more satisfactory. However, the low level of historical consciousness among the generality of people may be traceable to the little or no interest historians show in contemporary public affairs.

Historians shy away from analyzing current issues and offering opinions on the solution of the problems. This attitude may not be unconnected with the feeling among historians, professional historians, that the present is too fresh, sensitive and volatile for any cool, objective analysis to be made of it. The historian may also feel that there is not adequate and comprehensive evidence to justify a sound analysis of the issue before him.

With such attitude of mind and the behavior resulting from it, the historian is bound to be seen by policy-makers as irrelevant in the society's scheme of things and even as inimical to its interests. At best history and historian are given a low rating in the society's scale of priorities and the people therefore continue in their ahistorical behavior.

It should be noted, however, that people's ahistorical behavior is sometimes the result of their failure or stubborn refusal, to learn from history. George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), German Philosopher and an intellectual giant, has observed that "the one thing one learns from history is that nobody ever learns anything from history"¹⁰.

Although Hegel overstates the case, he nonetheless makes the vital point that some people fail to learn from history. But Rowse has observed, there is so much to learn from history which "offers people an inexhaustible store of vicarious experience upon which they may draw, instead of going through it all over again for themselves in ignorance and suffering"¹¹. The failure than to benefit from the lessons of history is not the fault of history itself but that of those who have failed to consult history for its lessons and abide by those lessons.

Towards Historical-Mindedness

It is well for the historian to emphasize continuously the fact that man from the moment he became a reflecting creature has tended to set store by his past experience. The lessons of that experience are the genesis of tradition, societal values, norms and sanctions. Among the ancients, there were Thucydides (747-400 BC) and Polybius (205-125 BC), two greatest of the ancient historians who saw history as a possible "guide to conduct" and "as containing examples and warning to statesmen".¹² To Cicero, history was *Magistra vitae* (teacher of life).¹³ Modern man was not without his own appreciation of the value of history. Early in this period, the men of the Renaissance embraced the study of history for the light it threw on events and the lessons man could learn from it. Among these Renaissance men, Sir, Francis Bacon (1561-1626). English Philosopher and author, compared history to other disciplines of his day and observed that where poetry makes man "Witty; Mathematics, subtle; natural philosophy, deep; moral, grave; logic and rhetoric, able to contend... histories make men wise"¹⁴.

Nearer our own day, Voltaire (1694-1778), French writer and one of the towering figures of the enlightenment, drew attention to the instructive value of past

experience. He averred:

The great errors of the past are very useful in many ways... one cannot remind oneself too often of crimes and disasters. These, no matter what people say, can be forestalled.¹⁵

Voltaire's observation has been borne out to an appreciable extent by the United Nations experiment. Winston Churchill, one of the greatest Englishmen that ever lived, studied and wrote history; He saw the lessons history could offer to those who were prepared to learn and utilize them. He understood German militarism since the days of Frederick the Great (1712-1786), the events and developments in Germany in the 1930's, what to expect and how best to meet the challenge posed by Hitler. His historical knowledge served him well.

In modern times also we know that successful nationalists drew on their relevant historical experiences in prosecuting their missions. The list is an unending one, among whom are Camillo Benso Conte di Cavour of Italy, Mahatma Ghandi and Jawaharla Nehru of India, Mao Tse Tung of China, Abdul Nasser of Egypt, Ben Bella of Algeria, Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria/Africa, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Sekou Toure of Guinea, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, to mention just a few. As with individuals so with nations in this act of learning from the lessons of history. Japan, for example, furnishes a good illustration of a nation learning from the experiences of other nations. From about the middle of the nineteenth century, when some forward-looking Japanese over threw the old regime, the Japanese have modernized and developed their state into one of the most prosperous of the present-day world.

Taking what they considered the best from the various Western nations they patterned their public education system after that of the United States, their legal system after that of the French, their Navy on that of the British and their military machine on that of the German empire. Profiting still by the technological experience of the West, Japan has emerged as one of the foremost nations of the world in the field of technology and electronics. In the same way with the necessary adaptations dictated by local circumstance, Nigeria can benefit from the experiences of other countries, in various fields of human endeavour. Internally, exchange of ideas and experiences among its various peoples, states and governments, can hasten its advances in the technological, industrial, agricultural and other fields.

In the vital task of national integration history has equally a vital role to play. The study of the remote and pre-colonial past of the various Nigerian ethnic groups can unearth underlying unities hitherto unsuspected, particularly in the areas of commercial and cultural contacts.

Our colonial history would reveal common colonial experience of exploitation and development, nationalist struggle and achievement, while the post-independence era would also show areas of common interest in terms of goals, and development plans, achievements and failures, problems and prospects. These are

historical realities that can be channelled to the forging together of Nigeria's diverse peoples and the making of a great nation.¹⁶

History and the historian can contribute to the making of sound public policy and the resolution of the country's contemporary issues and problems. The historian by his training is equipped to make a more in-depth and adequate analysis of current issues than economists, sociologists and other social scientists. In conceding the superiority of the historical method of analysis over the social science methods, Prof. Calude Ake, one of the Nigerian's eminent political scientists, observed that the social sciences cannot accomplish their task "unless they operate within the framework of historical analysis". For, he continued, if man in society "is to be understood at all, he must be understood as a phenomenon in process through time, which is, historically",¹⁷ Dr. Henry Kissinger, a former U.S. Secretary of State, speaking on the relevance of the historical perspective in the analysis of an aspect of state policy-(foreign policy)- asserted: "No significant conclusions are possible in the study of foreign affairs... without an awareness of the historical context"¹⁸. Prof. A.O. Anya of the Department of zoology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, writing about the value of a historical frame of reference for the people avered:

Without the guidance of the past, the present has been mortgaged to uncertainty and available error. The din of often ignorant and frenetic activity which characterize our present social and political area are but the symptoms of our cultural confusion. The challenge for our times, then, is to provide a frame of reference from the past for understanding the present, to define against the background of our past the tasks for the present and the insight, thus gained to chart the course for the emergence of a new... renaissance.¹⁹

Nigerian historians can help in fostering greater appreciation of the value of history by the Nigerian populace by showing the value and relevance of history in the contemporary Nigerian situation. They should show how knowledge of history contributes to better understanding of current issues and problems. Historical information and historical thought processes are an indispensable and integral part of policy-making. Historians should concern themselves more and more with the discussion and analysis of public issues through public lectures and debates, radio and television discussions, seminars and workshops, and feature articles in newspapers, popular magazines and journals. They should as much as possible establish meaningful contacts with policy makers or those in positions of power and authority. What is more, their performance in analyzing issues and problems and proffering suggestions should be so sound that they will attract appointments to important policy making positions.

The historian's laudable effort should of course, extend to the area of teaching. If he can inspire his students to have genuine interest in history he will be setting in motion a force that will produce an immeasurable multiplier effect on the people with regard to the popularity of history. Infact it is these students that will ask for

public lectures, debates and discussions on historical topics and issues. They will also carry out the local research projects that will arouse the people's interest in the historian's work and his products. The historian must also try as hard as he can to popularize history by producing good history books written in simple intelligible language and containing materials that delight and inspire. Such books will make the general public want to read or hear more about history. They will in consequence develop greater historical awareness and historical-minded behavior that inspires. Historians should also advertise their presence more by having local or state associations of history teachers and local branches of the Historical society of Nigeria.

Furthermore, the historian can foster historical-minded behavior among the people by exhibiting that type of behavior. He must always show that significant actions of his are guided by consideration of the past and its bearing on the present and future. In fact the true historian characteristically enough looks for backgrounds to issues or antecedents to events. In this exercise he is painstaking, calculating, objective, and balanced in his judgment. He also exhibits qualities of imagination and broad mindedness, patience and tolerance, qualities necessary for the survival and healthy growth of any human society, and the development of a virile nation.

On its part, government should help to make the people appreciate the value of history. It should make the study of history compulsory in the entire Nigerian educational system from the primary to the university level. This is because a nation without a sound and adequate knowledge of its past will repeat the mistakes of that past and will hardly advance beyond the stage of mediocrity. On the other hand, an adequate and sound knowledge of its past will equip it with the capacity to make sound and wise decisions that make for healthy, solid, and enduring development.

It is significant that the technologically advanced countries of the world-like: America, Britain, France and Russia to mention a few, accord history an important place in their national life. Significantly, the United States has a division in its state department manned by professional historians who advise on state policies. Promisingly the Nigerian government is enlisting the services of historians in important areas of the national life. Such as the former Director-General of the Nigeria Institute of International Affairs, and the former Provost of the Nigerian Defence Academy – a University for the military. Historians are also serving in several important national commissions or similar bodies. More need to be done still; the government should increase its appoint of historians to important policy making positions in government while encouraging private businesses and parastatals to do likewise. In addition to making the study of history compulsory in our entire educational system, government should enable promising but financially handicapped history students to prove their mettle by granting them scholarships along their counterparts in other disciplines. It should ensure the provision of adequate facilities for meaningful study of history in our institutions of learning. Furthermore, government should provide adequate funds for the research and writing of our national history and for seminars and workshops on

the teaching of Nigerian history. The recent effort by the historical society of Nigeria in mounting a workshop on the teaching of Nigerian history is commendable. Similar and subsequent efforts should be encouraged and sponsored by government. In addition government should see to the proper maintenance and promotion of our museums and archives. It should sponsor the production of historical films and shows that tell vividly important stories of our past.

Most importantly, government should ensure that products and graduates of the history discipline get increasing share of the employment market. They are excellent personnel material for the national development effort, particularly in the area of teaching, administration and diplomatic or foreign service. They should also work in the archives, museums, and research institutions.

On its part, the Nigerian populace must recognize that no nation can really become great without a reasonably agreed goal and principle of action founded on a sound knowledge of the past with its bearing on the present and future. Nigerians should recognize that no rational and meaningful act is possible without reference to the past. They must recognize the imperativeness of locating their true position in time and place and defining more accurately and clearly their goal if real progress is to be made. If history is the store-house of experience and the supreme guide to action, Nigerians must in their own interest, learn more history not less. They must appreciate and utilize the services of history and historians more and more not less. Only in this way will they be in a position to avoid the mistakes or errors of the past and advance on its positive achievements. Only with adequate historical awareness will Nigerians be in a position to make a forward march to a greater tomorrow.

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