

Exploration of Claude Ake's Historical Thinking

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Abstract

Claude Ake was one of African's finest minds and brilliant social scientists, whose intellectual oeuvres covered economics, political science, political economy, economic and political development, political theory, and democracy. But in a rare intellectual detour into academic and professional history, he gives insightful and impactful reflections on the subject of history. In this essay, we explore that particular work through its sub-themes such as its importance, relevance, and centrality to social sciences in general, its role in knowledge seeking, its limited perspectives, and Nigerian history (in both its progressive and retrogressive-elitist dimensions). Using content analysis method, this essay explores Ake's deep reflections on history and identifies some important insights which should help social scientists in advancing scientific research. His recommendations for the future of academic history include that social sciences cannot provide systematic explanation of social reality without historical analysis; the rigid partition between social sciences and history must be erased; academic history itself must follow certain protocols. For instance, it should not focus only on the past, Nigerian historians must transcend writing bourgeois and elitist history and must look at society in totality. The essay concludes agreeing with Ake that Nigerian historical scholarship must first be committed to societal change, bringing the masses and their struggles to the centre of history. Finally, it must be a potent tool for understanding and changing social reality.

Keywords: Claude Ake, academic history, historical thought, Marxism, Africa

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Introduction

Claude Eleme Ake (1939-1996) was one of African's brilliant radical political economists and theorists. In his lifetime, his intellectual productions covered a wide range of themes that included economics, political development, economic development, political economy, political theory, decentralisation and democracy in Africa, elections, ethnicity, federalism in African politics, nature and character of state in Africa, and human rights in Africa. Although Ake never trained or worked as an academic historian, nevertheless, most of his works were informed by strong historical perspective and methodology. For instance, in his widely read book *A Political Economy of Africa* (Ake, 1986) and in its first chapter which he titled "Methodology and theoretical foundations", Ake stated that one of the major characteristics of the method of analysis – dialectical materialism – he had adopted for analyses in the book was the dynamic character of reality confronting human beings and the society they are part of (Ake, 1986).

Under this method, different dimensions of the world are not merely some ordinary identities, or invisible and static phenomena. Ake states further that "The method encourages [researchers] to think of the world in terms of *continuity* and relatedness... (emphasis is mine)". Additionally, and still talking about his research and analytical method for the same book, he says the method "...treats the world as something which is full of *movement* and *dynamism* being provided by the contradictions which pervade existence (emphasis mine)". Talking about one of the many strong points and advantages of the method which he called "the development perspective", Ake is of the view that it

...allows us to see social phenomena in the context of their development. All too often the methods of traditional social science encourage a view of social phenomena as things which happen to be there, fully formed and with set characteristics – as something without a 'natural history.' But the method used here encourages the perception of social phenomena as elements of a continuum, or as moments of an unfolding process. It encourages

their perception as things which begin, become, and pass away (Ake, 1986, p. 6).

He posits further that

By putting social phenomena in the context of their development we are able to gain greater understanding of them. For one thing we are able to understand not only how they come to be what they are, but also to make reasonable conjecture as to what they might become (Ake, 1986, p. 6).

From these preceding extracts from the book, it can be seen that the two perspectives adopted by Ake are certainly and without doubt historical in their thrust. This is underscored by the fact that a phenomenon that has dynamism, movement, continuity, and in constant change as its basic features must leave in its trails many and varied historical developments. Suffice it to say then that these perspectives would inform most, if it is not all of Ake's works from the late 1970s onward when his ideological orientation changed from classical Western liberalism to neo-Marxism. This apparent Damascene conversion took place at the University of Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, where Claude Ake was then teaching (political science) – alongside some of the most radical and brilliant minds to have emerged from the African world in the 1970s and 1980s (Arowosegbe, 2012, p.128 and p. 132-135). Ake did not write any book that was strictly a historical text before his tragic death in November 1996. Nevertheless, his singular academic “detour” into and deep reflection on the methodology, importance, relevance, and practice of history as an academic discipline in 1982 still remains in the estimation of this present author original and germane to any serious and all-encompassing analysis and understanding of the socioeconomic and political realities in Africa.

This essay, therefore, seeks to explore the late Claude Ake's analysis of the methodology, practice, and relevance of academic discipline of history to Africa and Nigeria. This exploration is limited to that particular work on history referred to above. Following this introduction, the essay,

Ake's intellectual background, historical thinking and its critique is done in six separate sections. The first is a brief biography of Ake, and the main point of this is to discuss the history and development of Ake's intellectual and theoretical worldview in the direction of radical neo-Marxism. In the second section, the centrality of history to the social science in general is discussed. In the third section, the myopic orientation of professional historians, especially in Nigeria, is not only highlighted but critiqued by Ake. History as the substructure on which the foundation and the architecture of knowledge in general rests is analysed in section four. Section five in the main examines the need for Nigerian historical analyses to go beyond the dominant history, which is elite-focused and does not place the interests and the needs of the *masses of the people* at the centre of things. The masses, it must be noted are in the majority and they ought to command the respect of historians. Finally, the last section of the essay attempts some critique of Ake's historical thought and then the conclusion to this essay.

In April, 1982, the Annual Congress of the Historical Society of Nigeria took place at the University of Port Harcourt in the south-south region of Nigeria. The keynote address to the august assembly was given by Professor Claude Ake, who was then Professor of Political Economy in that university. Ake chose as the theme of his address "The Nexus between History and Social Sciences". The address, which was later represented by Professor J. F. Ade Ajayi as inspiring, important, and topical in the evolution of historiography in Nigeria was titled "History as the Future of Social Science" (Ake, 1990:19-27). Such was the level of acceptance, originality, and profundity of his intervention and reflection on the profession of academic history in Nigeria that the discourse was very well received by the body for professional historians in the African country.

Claude Ake: A Profile

Claude Eleme Ake was born on 18 February 1939 in Omoku, River State, Nigeria. For his secondary school education, he attended the famous King's College, Lagos, Nigeria. Whilst there, he sat for and passed the

Cambridge School Certificate with flying colours, a feat which earned him full scholarship to study Economics at Nigeria's premier university, the University of Ibadan (UI), from 1959-1962. For most of Ake's time at UI, the institution was known as the University College, Ibadan (UCI), which until the early 1960s, when Nigeria got her independence from Britain, was an affiliate institution to the highly regarded University of London (Arowosegbe, 2011:653). Ake graduated from UCI with a First Class Honours degree in Economics. Thereafter he gained admission to Columbia University in New York, where he eventually earned a Ph.D. degree in Political Science in 1966. His academic specialisations included Political Economy, Political Theory, and Development Studies. (Arowosegbe, 2011, p.653) Ake began his university teaching career at his alma mater, Columbia University, in 1966 as an Assistant Professor of Political Science. He stayed in Columbia for just two years, 1966-1968, and in 1969 transferred his service to Carleton University, Canada, where he remained till 1977(Arowosegbe, 2012:128). In 1977, Ake returned to Nigeria to teach at the fledging University of Port Harcourt, where he was appointed the founding dean of the university's Faculty of Social Sciences- a position he held till 1983(Arowosegbe, 2011, p. 653). In 1991, he left the University of Port Harcourt, to devote his time, energy, and resources to applied research. In 1992, he set up the Centre for Advanced Social Science (CASS) as the vehicle with which to actualise his many dreams for Africa's genuine development. In the same year also, he won Nigeria's National Merit Award. Four years later, in 1996, Ake was appointed a Visiting Professor at Yale University, USA (Arowosegbe, 2011, p. 653).

From 1970-1972, Ake was a Visiting Professor of Political Science at the University of Nairobi, Kenya, and from 1972 to 1974 he was a Visiting Professor at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. From 1975-1976 Claude Ake was the Director of Research for the African Association of Political Science (Arowosegbe, 2012, p. 128-130). In addition to these stellar achievements, he left behind a long list of impressive publications to his name. These include *The Theory of Political Integration* (1967), *Social Science as Imperialism: The Theory of Political Development* (1969), *Revolutionary*

Pressures in Africa (1978), *A Political Economy of Africa* (1981), *A Political Economy of Nigeria* (1985), *Democratization of Disempowerment in Africa* (1994), *Democracy and Development in Africa* (1996), and *Feasibility of Democracy in Africa* (2000) (Ogundeji and Saduwa, 1996, p. 5). Ake was trained in and strongly influenced by the North American analytic liberal tradition and academic works produced under it. Thus, from 1966 when he earned his Ph.D. degree in Political Science to the early 1970s when he shifted his theoretical framework to the radical neo-Marxist political economy, he was a thorough bred liberal scholar (Arowosegbe, 2008:10). Indeed the liberal approach informed all of his earlier works, that is, those produced before the early 1970s. A good example of such works is *The Theory of Political Integration* (1967). In the early 1970s, Claude Ake was a Visiting Professor at the University of Dar es Salaam. During his time at the institution, he was greatly influenced by the great radical Marxist debates going on there. These debates centred on such themes as class, state, and the role of imperialism in Africa. According to Arowosegbe, arguably the most prodigious scholar on Ake's biography, career and intellectual works (Arowosegbe, 2008a, 2008b, 2010, 2011, and 2012), the influence of the Dar es Salaam debates on him was immense. Quoting Thandika Mkandawire, an eye witness to and an active participant in the debates, he writes: "the Dar es Salaam School actually interrogated the question of how power is articulated and exercised in Africa and its implications for the manner in which society is constituted in the continent" (Arowosegbe, 2012:134). Furthermore, paraphrasing another participant in those great debates, A. M. Babu, Arowosegbe notes that the debates were "vigorous, discussion of the most burning issues of the day – classes, finance capital, imperialism, monopoly capitalism and neo-colonialism - issues which...had either been entirely ignored in Africa or had deliberately been subjected to oversimplified and therefore misleading investigations by opinion leaders, who themselves had developed vested interest in the pro-imperialist status quo" (Arowosegbe, 2012, p.134-135).

Having been strongly influenced by the great intellectual ferment at Dar es Salaam, his personal friendship with the great Caribbean Marxist

historian Walter Rodney, the author of the influential book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, and the writings of Frantz Fanon, another intellectual giant of Africa and African Diaspora, Ake's intellectual, ideological and theoretical orientation shifted from the Euro-American analytic liberal perspective to the neo-Marxist political economy paradigm (Arowosegbe, 2012). Other prominent African and Africanist intellectuals and scholars he came in close contact with while at the University of Dar es Salam included Colin Leys, John Saul, Dani W. Nabudere, Abdulraham M. Babu, Yashpal Tandon, Goran Hyden, Hamza Alavi, Issa Shivji, Justin Rweyemamu, Emmanuel Hansen, and Mahmood Mamdani (ibid). As we shall shortly see, it was this new exposure and perspective that eventually informed his arguments on academic history and much of his later works, beginning from the late 1970s onwards. Those works have included: *Revolutionary Pressures in Africa* (1978); *Social Science as Imperialism: the theory of political development* (1979); *A Political Economy of Africa* (1981); *The Political Economy of Nigeria* (1985); "The future of state in Africa 1985"; *Democracy and Development in Africa* (1996); and *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa* (2000). In the next section, we shall examine Ake's argument on academic History as being central to social sciences.

History's Centrality to Social Science

Until his demise, Ake was a brilliant, skilful, experienced, and widely published social scientist, who, it must be remembered, was schooled in Economics, Political Science, and radical Marxist Political Economy. Thus, in his very intensive and extensive research activities, he must have come to the derealisation that no meaningful social science research could in true conscience be carried out, particularly on Africa and other former European colonies around the globe without great immersion in and understanding of history and historiography. Set against this backdrop and with many years of experience in social science research and policy prescription, Ake decided in his April 1982 lecture to let the academic world into his inner thought about what he must have discovered about

History as an academic discipline, that is, what insight he must have gained from it, of what value was such understanding to his extensive scholarly oeuvre, and its relevance and importance to other social sciences (Ake, 1991,19). Ake indeed saw history as *the social science*, the mother of all social sciences or in the alternative it is the future of social sciences. Right from the start, Ake submitted that history plays crucial roles in championing scientific knowledge, especially as it concerns man and the society he is situated in. Meanwhile, the role that social sciences play in the explanation of society is not markedly different or very far from the role natural sciences play in explaining natural phenomena.

Social sciences are indeed a “systematic explanation of the social world by showing the empirical and logical relations between social events” (Ake, 1991, 19). But the social scientists on their own cannot achieve these laudable goals outside the framework of serious and rigorous historical analysis. Historical analysis comes into the mix because one of the crucial, if it is not *the* most crucial variable or phenomenon in the analysis of society, that is, human being, is subject to constant changes. In addition to the foregoing is the crucial fact of man or woman’s psychological and social make up. Thus “as he feels and thinks so he adjusts his behaviour.” This is because he or she is a social being. As a result, he or she has to be in constant touch and in relationship with fellow human beings; and he or she is more or less forced into constantly adjusting and recreating self - just so to stay alive. Set against the backdrop of the foregoing and in order to analyse human being closely and deeply, we cannot escape the time and material dimension within which he or she operates in. Ake says man [and woman] “... must be understood as a phenomenon in process through time...historically”(Ake, 1991, p.19). This development is even more imperative because man, not being in the category of natural elements like mineral and agricultural resources, cannot be studied experimentally as in laboratories. Hence, to study him or her in all dimensions, social and not natural sciences must locate and use explanatory tools that will permit exact comparisons to be carried out. Ake then suggests that a crucial factor in the analysis should be what he calls “historical time.” This, from all

indications, seems rather inevitable if it is considered that man or woman and the society he or she is crucially part of is in constant motion and change. Added to this important point, he says, is their lack of uniformity and regularity as in physical materials. Furthermore, neither man nor woman and his or her environment develop on own autonomously. Thus constituted, there is therefore no way then that social sciences will be able to generalise on conclusions relating to man or woman as it is done in natural sciences.

The question to ask then is: How best then must man or woman and society be studied and explained scientifically? To this important question, Ake's answer is that society and man must be compared at different points in time and phases of evolution and development. He says emphatically that "we cannot avoid anchoring social science scholarship on historical and development analysis" (Ake, 1991, 19). Ake, never known to be a narrow minded scholar, also believes that natural sciences cannot also evade the contextualisation of scientific studies and explanation "in developmental and historical context". In the context of the preceding argument, he is of the view that: "We do not really fully understand something [anything] without knowing its 'natural history' without knowing how it has come to be what it is (Ake, 1991, p.19)". In essence, no human experience can just happen and be accepted on the basis of its immediate or contemporary occurrence or seen as fully and completely developed. There must be a preceding evolutionary development over time. For Ake, if this were not the case, then science would not have made any sense at all (Ake, 1991, p. 19). Another practical reality or property of the scientific method is that its prediction does not fully reveal knowledge of the future, but rather it is the present state of cognition that is passing or has just passed. Ake is of the view that "our scientific knowledge is knowledge of this passing present from which we are also able to derive knowledge of the 'natural history' of the phenomenon in process, and ultimately in terms of their law of motion" (Ake, 1991, p. 20). This deep insight he believes must have been registered on the consciousness of the more successful social scientists, who soon realised the importance of dialectical thinking in the cognition

and understanding of human condition and development. Indeed, he sees History as *the* social science, which is the mother of all social sciences or indeed the real future of social sciences.

Right from the word go, Ake had argued that history plays extremely important roles in championing scientific knowledge, especially as it relates to man or woman in the society. Meanwhile, the role of other social sciences in the explanation of society is not different or far removed from the role natural sciences play in the explanation of natural phenomenon. Thus, social sciences in general are also a “systematic explanation of the social world by showing the empirical and logical relations between social events”. But social scientists will not be able to achieve this by standing alone; they have to work in tandem with history. Second, this category of scholars collapsed the partition erected between academic history and social sciences. To Ake, this intellectual position by those social scientists gives credence to Hegel’s view that “knowledge was only fully achieved in historical perspective”; as the historical process is that of reason (Ake, 1991, p. 20). Also agreeing with Karl Marx and quoting him approvingly, Ake says Marx appreciates the importance and relevance of history. Marx believes that history holds the key to both science and society. Actually, history is the “science of society.” Marx even sought to completely erase the barrier built between history and social sciences. He buttressed this action by arguing that economic theory is actually economic history. For Schumpeter, history is the core of social sciences (Ake, 1991, p. 20).

Ake says that notwithstanding the preceding perspectives on the inseparability of history from social sciences, most social scientists still strongly play down the value of history to their works. Therefore, he was inclined to wistfully refer to such social sciences that are devoid of historical perspective as “modern social science,” and, in another of his academic writings, he simply dismissed works as “western bourgeois social science” that is also “tendentially abstract.” As a result, because “of its lack of concreteness, [western] social science is not always sufficiently critical of the questions it asks and the significance of the type of knowledge that derives from these questions” (Ake, 1991, p. 20-21). Therefore,

Contemporary [western] social science does not appear to be fully aware that in studying man in society it is necessarily studying history, that history is the laboratory against which it must test and consolidate its knowledge about the social world. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that by neglecting history, social science promises itself no future (Ake, 1991, p. 20-22).

In essence, Ake is saying that history is the future of social science and is critical for acquiring scientific knowledge about society. Ake's sustained criticism against western social science, especially in relation to its lack of dynamism, dialectical thinking, and historical perspective, he did not start with his reflections on academic history in April, 1982. In *A Political Economy of Africa*, he argues that western social science's obvious lack of dialectical thinking and its seemingly static nature is strongly connected with the ideological commitment of western social science to the rationalisation and preservation of the existing international capitalist social order (Ake, 1981). In no environment is the weakness of western social science so clearly demonstrated than in its utilisation in the analysis and policy prescriptions for the so called third world countries. In the latter, according to Ake, the bulk of that social science "...is tendentially geared to the study of the status quo rather than change". No wonder then that Ake called for the incorporation of historical perspective to the methodology and practice of western social science (Ake, 1991, p. 20-21), especially in a place like Africa. Such incorporation will allow for a holistic and historical analysis of social, economic and political problems in the developing countries.

Much earlier in time, in 1979, Ake had published a slim volume which he titled *Social Science as Imperialism: the Theory of Political Development*(1979). In it, he had taken on the western social sciences, especially as it had been applied to Africa and the rest of the global south and concluded that collectively they are imperialism. He writes:

...Western social science scholarship on developing countries amounts to imperialism. Western social science scholarship on

developing countries is imperialism in the sense that (a) it foists, or at any rate attempts to foist on the developing countries, capitalist values, capitalist institutions, and capitalist development;(b) it focuses social science analysis on the question of how to make the developing countries more like the west; and(c) it propagates mystifications, and modes of thought and action which serve the interests of capitalism and imperialism (Ake, 1991, p. 20-22).

Thus, that social science showcases the West as the world's gold standard for political and economic development globally. It is strongly ideological, not a powerful analytical tool, biased, teleological, and Eurocentric knowledge that Africa and the developing world must swallow. It is a body of knowledge which developed organically in Europe and was to solve its multifarious problems and challenges. Then starting from the late nineteenth and continuing in the twentieth century, European imperial powers started colonising Africa and the third world. Not only were the various territories physically taken over and controlled; so were the peoples' minds and education twisted to serve the interest of imperialism. As Arowosegbe says of Ake:

“he defines colonialism as an effective instance of intervention and take-over in which local conceptions of time, space and modes of self-governance were dismantled; in which a new tradition was invented and presented to the colonized as sacrosanct, so that in their very act of self-understanding they could acquiesce in the moral and epistemic legitimacy of European sovereignty and superiority (Arowosegbe, 2000, p. 342).

The creation of these economic and intellectual imperialism and colonialism in the global south consequently left in their wake so many political, economic, social, cultural, technological, industrial, and educational challenges. This was not only during colonial period, but in the postcolonial period in the third world countries developing. Then in the postcolonial period, Western social science and social scientists blamed all the problems identified above on the fact that right from

the beginning, Africa and the developing world have been backward, primitive, weak, uncouth, uncivilized, under-developed, bereft of initiative and entrepreneurial spirit, irrational and excessively emotional, and totally lacking in organic solidarity. For western social science and social scientists, the solutions to the foregoing myriad of problems are the wholesale adoption of western modernization, economic and political development models, and capitalism.

But for Ake, these self-serving solutions, which the West has been applying in the developing world since the mid-twentieth century, have led to dependence and underdevelopment on the part of developing countries. It is in view of the foregoing that Ake argues that any social science that will help in transforming Africa and the developing world must first consider the history of those areas. It is in furtherance of this position that he advocates that academic history ought to be an ineluctable part and parcel of social sciences.

Limited Perspectives of History

It is not only social scientists, however, that appear to be too narrow-minded in their methodology, orientation and work. According to Ake, historians up until recently had argued that professional history was totally different from other branches of knowledge. In particular, the argument was that its very nature and methodology are completely different from those of natural and social sciences (Ake, 1991, p. 22). Furthermore, historians were of the strong view that the research methodology of their profession centred only on gathering and analysing of past historical data; and then weaving them together and writing stories out of them. For these historians, the formulation and use of elaborate general theories, engagement in elaborate explanations and the making predictions about the future are just not for them, they are not their forte (Ake, 1991, p. 22-23). Third, historians give the impression that they have little or no business analysing present events or happenings; the focus should be on the past. That way, they would be far removed from those events and therefore would be somewhat objective in their work. Four, they insist that

human beings, the key elements involved in the narration of past events, are unique, dynamic, and not amenable to scientific experimentation and replication. Five, historians opine that it is impossible for them to maintain absolute neutrality and objectivity – as in natural and social sciences - in the studying and narration of social and past events, which, it must be stated, are neither controllable nor reversible (Ake, 1991, p. 22-23). Meanwhile, objectivity is not attainable because, after all, historians are part and parcel of the society whose past they seek to study.

To all the foregoing submissions by historians, Ake says they are rather weak and untenable. In the first place, on the matter of history not concerning itself with the present, Ake says history is not only about the past; because if the contrary were to be the case, then there will be no knowledge of the past at all. For Ake, “Only the living man can know and he can only know as he is, only in terms of his faculties as determinate consciousness”. Furthermore, “we know the past only in so far as we dissociate it from its pastness (sic), assimilate it into the present and make it part of a present reality” (Ake, 1991, p. 23). Second, with respect to the point that history cannot be as scientific in its methodology and results as the natural sciences, Ake conceded that that man is more complex than metals and other non-living things. In addition, he stated that human experiences cannot be repeated and replicated in scientific studies and human consciousness cannot be experimented on. Thus, many limitations are placed on the possibility of achieving scientific knowledge through the academic discipline of history. But to Ake, all of these challenges notwithstanding, history can still be a science; embracing and using the same scientific methodologies and principles - just as with natural sciences. He says “We never really know what cannot be done; we only know what has not been done. Strictly speaking, to assert that something is impossible will presuppose absolutely complete knowledge about it and about all other circumstances bearing on it” (Ake, 1991, p. 22-23) In essence, Ake is saying that the scientific way should not be foreclosed on history. This is because “...things which seem chaotic and complex today might be understood and reduced to simplicity tomorrow that present

orthodoxies might become future heresies” (Ake, 1991, p. 23). Finally, “Science is always keeping options open, always wary of claiming to cover all possibilities”(Ake, 1991, p. 23).

History and Knowledge Seeking

Having argued above that academic history qualifies to be scientific– in its own right - in terms of its nature, methodology and the thrust of its work, Ake next examines how it can help in acquiring scientific knowledge of sociopolitical and economic realities. But how is this to be carried out? To start with, the historian must ask himself or herself some basic questions, which according to Ake, must include “what happened?” or “what really happened?” He said in providing key answers to them, the historian must go all out for “objective truth,” which is achieved by inferring from the presently available facts of “how things are” now. The historian cannot now go back in time – physically - to study the past (Ake, 1991, p. 23). The present, therefore, plays important role in historical analysis. Secondly, the historian, in trying to discover the past, Ake argues, ought to follow the methodology of science - in not only identifying, but in selecting and analyzing evidence and facts and in relating events– logically and empirically. Thus, the historian “...must have some faith in the possibility of the scientific treatment of his [her] material and assume an objective mode of being which is ascertainable”(Ake, 1991, p. 23).

For history therefore to be able to contribute to scientific knowledge of the world, it must go well beyond fidelity to scientific techniques and research methodology. It must rest “...on the perspectives from which scientific work is done, the values which it maximizes implicitly or explicitly, and on the marrying of scientific work to the critical struggles and issues of our social existence.”(Ake, 1991, p. 24)In summary, Ake is positing that whether we like it or not, there is a close connection between scientific research, objective realities in society, and the consciousness of the scientist engaged in research. Moreover, these contextual parameters define research; and while we cannot escape from them, it is imperative that we master them. But how so? “We can be more critical about what

we do and make allowances for the perspectivistic (sic) character of knowledge; we can try to determine by analysis the values which underline our methodologies and theories and the interests that underlie the quest for particular forms of knowledge..." (Ake, 1991, p. 24)

Nigerian History: Beyond Important Personalities and Ethnic Groups

Earlier on, Ake had argued for the need to marry individual researcher or historian's perspective and values with the scientific work at hand and the social, economic, and political struggles in society. He is impressed that such committed scholarship was there in the beginning of the writing of Nigerian history. Nigerian historians understood and acted accordingly on the corrosive impact of colonialism on scholarship and had gone all out in a determined effort to decolonise it. They did more than that:

They contributed greatly to the necessary rehabilitation of our dignity in the wake of colonialism and to the strengthening of our nationalist struggles. Nigerian historians have demonstrated anew the poverty of the notion of disinterested pursuit of knowledge; they have shown that there is no contradiction between scholarship, science and commitment, that commitment can stimulate scientific progress (Ake, 1991, p. 25).

Excellent as this contribution was, it did not last long; certainly not into postcolonial Nigeria. According to Ake, during this era, the progressive consciousness of Nigerian historians seemed to have waned and subsequently became a hindrance to further advancement of their scholarship. This negative outcome would blind them from knowing that "the interests of the indigenous bourgeoisie are limiting the chances of further scientific progress" (Ake, 1991, p. 25). The latter group had decided for selfish reason to main the status quo colonial political economy inherited rather than drastically revolutionising it. Although the scholars had helped in providing intellectual framework and justification for the nationalist struggles, the more pertinent postcolonial class contradictions in society that were having debilitating impact on the mass of the people

seemed to be entirely lost on them. Coupled with this fact is that they still continue to write such history that favour and represent the upper classes in society. The implication of this reality, according to Ake, is that “historical scholarship will yield very (sic), if any, understanding of society in so far as it confines its interest to a small part of society and forgets the rest” (Ake, 1991, p. 25). By the rest, Ake is referring to the majority of the people, which is made up of the workers farmers, unemployed and unemployable, the “lumpen” (louts, hoodlums, and those who seem to have lost all hope in life). He then says: “I ought to add that by concentrating on the important individuals and small hegemonic groups we inevitably succumb to the danger of psychologising history and neglecting objective conditions” (Ake, 1991, p. 26). Not only that, “It is highly misleading to represent society as though its development is dictated simply by the will and actions of leaders. Indeed the role of will or volition in the historical process is more limited than it appears” (Ake, 1991, p. 26). What then should be the role of historian in writing about these matters? Ake says: “As scientists we must take account of human volition and action. But we must go beyond human will to objective conditions if we are to understand society and its laws of motion” (Ake, 1991, p. 26).

For Ake then, it is the objective conditions that really determine all we can possibly do in Nigeria; its neglect and that of radical commitment to action - over the years - is responsible for the unrepresentative nature of contemporary historiography and lack of government policies and programmes aimed at achieving societal progress. In conclusion, he calls for historical scholarship of commitment that will advance the country. Second, it must bring the masses and their struggle for survival to the epicentre of history. This way, Nigerian historians will focus more on the objective conditions in society. This in turn will ensure they understand society better as a “complex totality”. Thus, they will “make [historical scholarship] part of the living present and into a powerful tool for comprehending and transforming social reality” (Ake, 1991, p. 26).

Criticism and Conclusion

There is no doubt that Claude Ake's historical thinking as navigated above has been influenced by Marxist methodologies of dialectical materialism and historical materialism. In assessing this particular work of Ake, which is his thinking on history in this essay, we cannot escape some of the general criticisms against Marxist history. First, it would appear that too much emphasis has been placed on objective and material conditions in historical analysis. But man has never been only concerned about what he eats, drinks, and wears, but also in ideas, culture, religion, spiritualism, music, arts, and so on (Tosh, 2002, p. 227-228). Second, Marxist history has been criticised for its determinism, narrowness, historicism, and its apparent rigid schema about the history of mankind. Under it, human history is supposed to transverse five or six linear stages, starting from communalism and proceeding to the slave owning society, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, and culminating in communism. It is just that no society so far in human history has developed in such a neat way and logically passed through these rather abstract stages of development (Law, 1978, p. 42-46; and White, 1978, p. 54-55 and 61 - 65). Only two countries came close to running elaborate and successful socialist systems of government. These were USSR and China. In the early 1990s, the USSR collapsed under the weight of several global, national, and local contradictions. The old USSR Empire eventually broke up into so many sovereign nations - without advancing to the level of communism. In the case of China, at about the same time as the demise of USSR, the country was busy diluting its socialist experiment with an open embrace of market forces - characteristic of the capitalist system (Akpuru-Aja, 1998, p. 138-142).

Third, Ake is scathing in his criticisms of Western social sciences, especially as it has been applied in Africa and in the rest of the third world. He had argued that Western social science was developed in Europe and North America in response to the social, economic, political, cultural, industrial, and educational realities of these locations. Therefore, any attempt to apply it to the Third World countries hook, line and, sinker

amounted to imperialism. It is imperialist because such imposition is meant to ensure that the Third world countries follow the economic trajectories of the western world, which will culminate in capitalism. After all, imperialism, according to Lenin, is the highest stage of capitalism. However, Marxism is also foreign to Africa; it did not originate from the continent. Marx had developed it as a tool of analysis and struggle for the proletariat against the oppression of the capitalist class in Europe (Akpuru-Aja, 1998, p. 139-140). Four, in his essay explored above, which was published in the early 1990s, Ake seems too biased in favour of Marxism and socialism. Interestingly enough, he wrote and published the essay at a time when it was obvious socialism was already coming off wheels in Eastern Europe and Asia. Five, he was too optimistic and idealistic about the prospect of Marxist history, socialist ideology, and socialist system in Nigeria. The advent of post-modernism, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism in the intellectual world, the rejection of grand or meta-narratives in history, the collapse USSR, the serious modification of the socialist system in China, and the deepening contradictions of postcolonial and neoliberal state in Nigeria brought weariness to the most ardent of socialist scholars and ideologues in Nigeria. Six, scrutinising closely the entire essay, Ake seems more of a seer than a hard-nosed social scientist. He would appear to have deliberately ignored the then unfolding reality in the world. Seven, he shied away from insisting that a history scholarship informed by theory must pay greater attention to analysis of historical past using archival sources and data.

It is not, however, all gloom and doom for Ake's historical thought. His reflections have revealed very positive and relevant insights that should greatly advance historical scholarship not only in Nigeria, but in the rest of the world. In the first instance, Ake has proved that European or any other social sciences cannot truly provide systematic explanation of social phenomena without the introduction of historical perspective and analysis. Also, Ake has successfully argued that for scholars to be able to analyse and then change the world, the artificial partition between social sciences and history should be removed. This will guarantee the analysis

of the totality of society, that is, what is referred to as total history (Tosh, 2000, p. 133-135). Third, in view of the importance of history, to assist social sciences in carrying out scientific research of society in its entire developmental processes, academic history, Ake rightly advises, must follow certain principles. First, it must jettison the idea that it is only concerned with past events. History must also be concerned with the present; because without the present it cannot gain historical knowledge of the past outside the environment of the present. History for example will be meaningless to Third World countries if they cannot research their present underdevelopment in the light of what must have happened in the past. Looking back to the past allows us to mine a lot of evidence to determine, “when the rain started to beat us”¹. Moreover, history should not all be about the rare and particular, but in discovering general historical patterns in society, like discovering scientific laws of society. This is achievable if history adopts the research methods of social and natural sciences. In addition, it must seek scientific and objective truth if it must be seen as a social science or the future of it.

Four, Nigerian historians actually started very well in the 1950s and contributed greatly to the nationalist struggles and the attainment of political independence. They successfully married science, scholarship, and commitment. Committed scholarship will stimulate scientific progress, because it is for the liberation of society. In the postcolonial period, however, Nigerian historians’ consciousness stagnated; they became engrossed with elitist and bourgeois history and neglected the masses of the people and their interests. Ake insists that Nigerian historians should examine society in all its totality and must ensure historical scholarship is part of the unfolding history of the world. Furthermore, history must be a crucial part of the living present, and be a powerful instrument for understanding and changing social reality.

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