

The Nigerian Historian and the Challenge of Relevance in the Era of Globalization

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Introduction

History has virtually become a minority subject in Nigerian universities. Worse still, it is held with so much contempt in the employment market. At the intermediate school level, it is a third alternative to government, or geography. My daughter only recently confessed to me that of the 834 students who sat for the West African Schools Certificate Examinations in her school (Queen's College, Yaba) this year, only six registered for history. Hardly does any student chose history as a desired course of study in the university matriculation examinations. Those who are studying it are suffering from a crisis of confidence in a discipline on the precipice. As a result, many departments of history are not able to fill the available spaces. A few years ago when educational administrators threatened to rationalize some courses, history was among those earmarked.

Nor has the professional practice of history fared any better. The challenge has been that of relevance to finding solutions to national problems of political stability and economic underdevelopment as well as providing paid and self-employment to graduates. Unlike the so-called professional and economic sciences, history is viewed as professionally irrelevant and at best a leisurely enterprise. The current situation is a far cry from the prestige and honour which the discipline and its practitioners were held, especially in the immediate post-Independence period on to the 80s. This lecture therefore sets for itself the task of examining the

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degree to which the Nigerian historian could be said to have braced up for the challenges of the 21st century. How set is the Nigerian historian for the battle of tomorrow? Indeed, what battle are we talking about? Is it true that in fighting tomorrow's battle we have been employing yesterday's weapon? How do we ensure that we do not persist in employing antiquated weapons for battle in a nuclear war? Before proceeding to answer these questions, we might do well by first adumbrating the evolution, development and ideological content of historiography in general and African (Nigerian) historiography in particular.

The Evolution, Development and Ideological Content of African Historiography

As a modern intellectual activity, history dates back to the beginning of the human society. It reached a stage of sophistication during the era of classical antiquity, but lapsed during the Roman period. It however witnessed a new resurgence during the era of the Renaissance at which time its methodology and rational perception were fairly advanced. By the 19th century, history had emerged as a scholarly discipline through the efforts of Leopold von Ranke and other German scholars, from which it entered the contemporary period. Each of these epochs had its body of knowledge which history students and historians learn from. But our task here is not to embark on an exhaustive study of these periods, for this has been done elsewhere (Carr, 1978; Collingwood, 1962; Sturly, 1972; Marwick, 1970; and Obiegbu, 2001). Rather our tasks is to assess the evolution of African (and by extension Nigerian historiography) with a view to depicting the degree to which it constituted the ideological wing of the struggle for decolonization and independence.

For the foregoing survey of historiography to be relevant, some special reference need to be made to the history of historical writing in Africa. This is very important because the tendency has been for western scholars to pretend African historiography does not exist, even though, as it is well known, "the writing of African history is as old as the writing of history itself" (Fage, 1981). We had, for example, the writings of such men as al-

Mas'udi (c. 950), al Bakri (1029–1094), Ibn Battuta (1304–1369) and others. It was however ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) that could be said to have engaged in looking at history in its modern and current sense.

Indeed, as has been suggested elsewhere, “if he were better known to western scholars (he) might well usurp Herodotus” title of “the father of history” (UNESCO 1981:26). Perhaps because Ibn Khaldun was an African from Tunis, and part of his work was on Africa, he might well have been intentionally ignored by western scholars. Whatever was the case, the fact remains that his view of history as a cyclical process, his use of analysis and comparisons in his work, coupled with his insistence that all evidence should not be weighed equally, stood him out as one of the greatest historical thinkers and writers of the early period. In a fitting testimony to his intellectual acumen, the respected professor of African history, Prof. Ali Mazrui, voted ibn Khaldun as the African man of letters in the last millennium.

Beside the works of ibn Khaldun and the other mentioned writers, there were also *Tarikh*s and Chronicles such as *Tarikh al-Sudan*, *Tarikh al-Fatlash* as well as the Kano and Kilwa *Chronicles*. These writings were to be followed by those of European travelers such as Cadamosto, Barbot and Bosman. By the 18th century, European historians had begun to give some attention to tropical Africa. There were, for instance, Dalzel's *History of Dahomey* published in 1793 and Silva Corrcia's *History of Angola* published in about 1742. Different writers also made several other publications, writing and comments pertaining to tropical Africa. Of course, not all these writings and comments were positive. Typical of the negative ones were those of Hugh Trevor Roper in which he alleged that what people call history in Africa was nothing but the “unrewarding gyrations of barbarian tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe” (Roper, 1963). On his part, C. G. Seligman in his *Races of Africa* (1930) concluded that “the civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites, its history, the record of these peoples and their interactions with the other African stocks, the Negro and the Bushmen . . .” (cited in Fage, 1981:35).

It is in reaction to this kind of writings that there developed what

became known as the “new African historiography,” in which Africans and a few non-African tried to debunk many of these Eurocentric views about Africa. In other words, the emergence of nationalist movements in the various African colonies during the second quarter of the 20th century altered the intellectual climate within which historical scholarship was pursued. The nationalist movements sought to revive within the colonies, African culture with values at variance with those of the colonizers (Bernstein & Depelchin, 1979: 24-25).

As the nationalists began to triumph, African history began to reject the perspective and restraints imposed on the colonial situation and to create a “new history,” and a rich one at that. The task was to establish that the African past had glorious achievement to its credit, which allows it to be comparable to those of Europe. Thus, if Europeans had established organized polities, monarchs and cities, then nationalist historiography felt challenged to prove that Africans too had produced such. Thus as Ranger (1976:18) notes, “there was a demand for some almost any past . . . as a source of pride in Africa.”

Such notions are demonstrated in the works of K. Onwuka Dike, who first published in 1956, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1885*. In this work, which was intended as an “introduction to the economic and political history of Nigeria, Dike using the Delta community as a case study, demonstrates the viability and richness of Africa history.

Saburi Biobaku in 1957 published his *Egba and their Neighbours: 1842-1872*, in which he depicts the game of power politics among the Yoruba people. There were also notable examples in other parts of Africa amongst who was B.A. Ogot, who worked on the history of the Southern Luo in East Africa. All these had similar vision and were engaged, as Ranger (1976:18), recalls “in the task of demonstration of the possibility and viability of the field” and the evocation of a glorious past in the face of its denial by the colonial mythology of racism. One other important aim of these scholars was to show that the course of the history of relationships between Africans and Europeans down to the colonial period was itself

determined as much by the responses of Africans as by the actions of the agents of imperialism (Okuseinde, 2001:56).

Indeed, nationalist historiography should not just be seen as an installation component of the movement towards the independence of African states. Rather it must be seen as an ideological response to racialism and the inherent idea of cultural supremacy. For, whereas the early black scholars sought to enhance the status of the Blackman, the nationalist historian pursued the idea further by extolling whatever in African. Egypt was reclaimed from the Mediterranean civilization and declared a region of African history. The histories of the ancient empires of Ghana, Mali and Songhai were resurrected from oblivion and given the widest publicity as African achievements in Empire building. As one observer noted of the Egyptian experiment, it was essentially Negro and all Africans could draw the same moral advantage that westerners draw from Greco-Latin civilization (Temu & Swai 1981:22). Put differently, the contributions of ancient Egypt to the civilization of the world was emphasized as Africa's contribution to world history.

As if to consolidate the above idea, it was argued that the renowned ancient philosophers of Europe, including Plato, Isidore and Pythagoras gained tremendous inspiration from Africa, which only could explain why they spent thirteen to twenty years in Egypt (*ibid*). More outlandish claims soon emerged. For example, in the work of Dick Awka, Moses and Buddha were seen as Egyptian Negroes; Christianity derived from Sudanic people; and Nietzsche, Bergson, Marx and the existentialists were reflections of Bantu philosophy (Wallerstein, 1964:309). And so, for the moment, these assumptions were enthroned as historical facts.

In spite of these strenuous efforts, concurrent Europe-centric view of Africa still persisted. Imperial historiography continued to treat Africa as extras in an essentially European epic. One could hear Trevor Roper from his base in Oxford contemptuously declaring history "cannot be created out of the darkness discernible in the African past" (Ajayi & Alagoa, 1979:403). In light of this assertion, nationalist historians continued to evolve strategies to dislodge the prevailing racist outlook. One innovation

was in the area of sharpening the methodological tool of African historiography. For instance, non-written sources were acknowledged and utilized as legitimate tools of producing historical knowledge. Information from other disciplines like anthropology, archeology and linguistics were also employed in studying the African past.

Such was the degree of achievement recorded by African historians that in 1965 when Julius Nyerere, then President of Tanzania, addressed the Dar es-Salaam Conference of African Scholars, he could confidently pontificate thus:

You are not starting right from the beginning. Because of the work which has already been done, there is one thing which this conference will not have to discuss. That is the contention that Africa has no history! The days when this was seriously suggested by intelligent men and women have now passed (cited in T.O. Ranger, 1962:2).

But what have we learned thus far? We have learned that in recent past, history as an academic discipline has been confronted with extinction. We have learned that this situation was not always so; for, especially during the period of the struggle for independence, history came handy as an ideological tool to imbue Nigerians with the needed confidence in taking on the colonials. We have learned that contrary to some uninformed speculation, Nigerian and indeed African history, i.e., is as old as the history of any other civilization. The summary of the foregoing is that Nigerian historians could be said to have used yesterday's weapon in prosecuting yesterday's battle.

To the extent that the study of ancient empires and civilizations exploded the myth of the Hamitic hypothesis, which attributed every achievement in, political organization and cultural development to external (that is, "white") culture heroes, to this extent, Nigerian African historians could be said to have triumphed.

However, from the late 1970s, the discipline faced a crisis of identity and relevance and came under heavy criticism for romanticizing or

mystifying the past, adopting monocasuality in the interpretation of events and for irrelevance to current needs (Olukoju, 2001:127). As an active participant in the nationalist struggle, the Nigerian historian was willingly or otherwise a nationalist historian. He was thus caught in the trap of excessively romanticizing the past to justify his people's demand for political independence (Tenu & Swai, 1981; Adeoye, 1992; Dibua, 1997). Second, there was a tendency in the discipline to engage in reductionism or monocasuality. A single factor or group of factors was usually singled out as a cause of a major event. Thus the transatlantic slave trade or colonialism was highlighted almost to the virtual neglect or underestimation of other, equally compelling considerations (Afigbo, 1977; Afigbo, 1978:31-39). Worse still, it became glaring that the discipline lacked access to the lower class and was rightly perceived as an elitist preoccupation.

Furthermore, the Nigerian historian's unwillingness or incapability to make use of models and concept in organizing their data incited critical comments from the likes of Prof. John Peel, a sociologist who had himself made extensive use of historical data (Smith, 1977: 49-59). Accepting the criticism, Prof. Ade Ajayi concurs that "models and concepts as tools of analysis, have become critical matters of necessity for the historian if we are to make significant progress" (Ade Ajayi, 1980:39). Yet another criticism of Nigerian historians was that their admittedly technically perfect histories failed to address problems of public policy since they shied away from confronting current issues. Many historians, it is alleged, studied the past for its own sake rather than as a means of profering solutions to current problems (Olukoju, 2001:128).

Tomorrow's Battle

The context must be clear: we are in the era of the new globalization. Innovations in science and technology, communications and economic relations are becoming the order of the day. Yet, a simple look at the current state of the Nigerian economy and society reveals a frightening and sorry state of affairs. Children are engaged in prostitution, workers are not paid regularly for work performed, ditto for contractors both local and

expatriate. Assassinations have become a national trademark with the police yet to display any capacity for solving mysterious killings. The roads are in total disrepair. Universities are closed sometimes for seven months with the government displaying an unconscionable degree of indifference, even as libraries are at least seven to ten years behind in the relevant literature. Traditional institutions have been corrupted, compromised and rendered useless, corruption has become not just a way of life, but life itself, despite the lip-service occasionally pronouncing government's determination to ensure its eradication and unemployment and under-employment have reached unprecedented levels. To all these may be added the fact that the health care delivery system is still in the doldrums, with deteriorating facilities, lack of funds and equipment, and with qualified staff abandoning the hospitals and clinics for greener pastures. Electricity is still as erratic as ever with serious implications for all sectors, especially industry. Transportation and communications are still archaic with many banks, hospitals and businesses unaware of the utility of computers even in 2020! Finally, in spite of the proliferation of states, local governments, ministries, parastatals, banks for agriculture, industry, housing and so on, the Nigerian economy is still largely a "private economy" largely governed by informal regulations. Thus, given the degree of decay and deterioration, the marginalization of the people, rural neglect, institutional fragility, and declining interest from foreign investors, the average Nigerian can be forgiven if he now feels that political independence has made little difference in the quality of life of the people. In a world where people of all ages are discovering new boundaries of knowledge and articulating powerful ideas that are bound to shape the future, such defeatist, fatalistic and submissive attitudes hardly support an agenda for a productive and rewarding participation in the new world order. For our purpose the emerging question from the foregoing scenario is: How have the Nigerian historians reacted to the unfolding drama? Put differently, what new weapons have been fashioned by practicing Nigerian historians to combat this worrisome state of affairs?

In confronting the scenario painted above the Nigerian historian

would undoubtedly have to make recourse to contemporary history. But the contempt of Nigerian historian for this branch of history is well known. This writer recalls the frustrations faced while trying to choose a contemporary topic of study which was dismissed for no other reason other than their contemporary nature. Nigerian historians seemed to have drawn inspiration from the declaration of Arthur Marwick to the effect that “to go all modern, and deny any value to the study of earlier history, is in fact to deny the value of history altogether” (Marwick, 1970:281). They further posit that it is unnecessary to seek a rehabilitation of History through overstressing its utilitarian value in order to carve a role for it. The historian’s past, whether in the West, or in Africa, they argue, should be conceived as a period distant enough to task the effort and imagination of the researcher and allow a reasonable degree of detachment that will afford an objective reconstruction of the evolution of societies and cultures through an interpretative analysis of cultural survivals and oral traditions (Adediran, 2002:6).

Nor was that all, for it has been argued that the more distant the historian’s focus, the greater the opportunity to contribute to an understanding of long-term development culminating in contemporary phenomena. Indeed, it is further stated, for development to have an enduring impact in any society; there is need for it to be properly rooted in the peoples’ culture, which is the totality of their historical experience. Thus, an understanding of long-term structural changes in the society they insist is crucial in explaining the shaping of the present especially because it provides a solid basis for self-assertion and group solidarity (*ibid.*). As if to fortify this position, the doyen of the discipline, Prof. Ade Ajayi asserts:

Perhaps one reason why there is so much violence, aggression and instability in our day-to-day life is that we have little conscious of a time perspective. We act and react as if there is only today, we have no enduring heroes and we respect no precedents. Not surprisingly, we hardly ever consider what kind of future we are building for our children and our children’s children. (1984:85:1)

For the avoidance of doubt, this writer is not by any means trying to denigrate the traditional understanding of the meaning of history or what it stands for, that is “a narrative based on a scientific reconstruction of past activities of man.” Rather what is being emphasized is that for the historian, the past is not an isolated entity completely cut off from the present, indeed, there is continuity between the two. E.H. Carr (1961) summarizes it impressively when he refers to history as “an unending dialogue between the past and the present” (p. 49). Thus when Benedetto Croce admonishes that “the practical requirements which underlie every historical judgment give to all history the character of “contemporary history,” what he implies is that whatever account the historian produces has some relevance to the present (1941:15). I shall be expatiating further on this using the Yoruba as a case study.

For about one hundred years (1793–1893), the Yoruba people had engaged in various wars among themselves. Beginning with the constitutional crisis in which saw several *Alaafin* being made to commit suicide following conflicts with the *Oyomesi* under the leadership of the *Basorun* who was *primus inter pares*, to the takeover of Ilorin by the Muslims following Afonja’s extermination in 1823, to the destruction of Owu in 1881 by a combination of Ijebu and Ife and roaring band of Oyo refugees, to the emergence of Ibadan as a nascent power in 19th-century Yorubaland, to the challenge of Ibadan power by Kurnmi of Ijaiye, the Are-Ona Kakanfo, to the resolve by the Ekiti, Ijesa, Akoko and Igbomina to resist Ibadan’s tyrannical rule through the formation of the Ekiti Parapo confederacy.

One fact which needs to be emphasized at this point is that Yoruba nationalism did not exist until recently. All the various kingdoms considered others, even though speaking the same language, as aliens. The Ekiti and Ijesa, for example, did not see any difference between the Ilorin and Ibadan hegemonist desires. The war did not come to an end until the British took it upon themselves to enforce peace.

It is essential to stress that the consequences of this century of warfare on the psychology and politics of the Yoruba people were long lasting.

In fact, one cannot totally understand the politics of the Yoruba today without karking back to these difficult and disturbing times of warfare. The war ironically fostered the spirit of proto nationalism in Yoruba land (Osuntokun 2001:154). The feeling of oneness among the Yoruba today is no doubt traceable to a feeling of common and unifying ancestry with Ile-Ife being the initial point of takeoff. Somehow, the one hundred years war came to be regarded as nothing more than a bitter struggle between children of the same father. Perhaps, more than any other tribe in Nigeria, the Yoruba understood and appreciated the deleterious effect of violence and warfare. No wonder they resisted the resort to arms in the prosecution of the June 12 struggle. Put differently, the recent history of the Yoruba has taught them how to survive in difficult times.

The extended discussion of the recent history of the Yoruba has been outlined to fortify the viewpoint that history can be –

Useful in meeting new situations . . . because a full understanding of human behavior in the past makes it possible to find familiar elements in present problems and thus make it possible to solve them more intelligently (Strayer, 1978:264).

If we thus accept that there is a connection between the past and the present, the reluctance or indeed refusal of the Nigerian historian to comment about contemporary issues therefore becomes a disservice to the Nigerian nation. Who, other than the historian, is best placed to comment and proffer viable solutions to the numerous socio-economic crises confronting the nation? Who, especially by virtue of training, is best placed to enlighten policy makers about the implications of some of the fundamental decisions, especially regarding communal crises, cry of marginalization and even corruption? The refusal of historians to take up the challenge perhaps account for its takeover and subsequent monopoly by practitioners of “inferior history.” This may account for the submission of the Guilbenkian Commission declaration (1998) that –

To be historical is after all not the exclusive purview of persons called historians ... we do not believe that these are monopolies of

wisdom, or zones of knowledge reserved to persons with particular university degrees (ibid).

While it is true that the rigid compartmentalization of knowledge has been blunted, an acceptance of the kind of views being put forward above can only encourage pretenders to make forays into areas for which they have no competence. No wonder, the writing of biographies is now dominated by journalists.

As earlier alluded, for over four decades, the teaching curricula in most African universities have been an overreaction to the euro-centric conception of history. But African history has matured beyond the level of demonstrating that African has a pre-European history that could be reconstructed. While it is true that in our programmes we should emphasize the history of African peoples as this will put us on firm ground and enable us counter effectively such issues as racism and neo-colonialism, there is no doubting the fact that, if we seek to have a good comprehension of the world in which we live, there are some aspects of world history that should not be ignored. This is because, national frameworks, in any field, are now recognized as unsatisfactory for political action and academic enquiry. Especially since the last two decades of the 20th-century, historians worldwide have found it necessary to transcend the national boundaries in their research, to document the actual history of humanity. Globalization has brought in its wake those subjects whose comprehension requires global frameworks. These subjects, including environmental issues, health of populations, crime, migration, transportation, popular arts etc can no longer be understood and regulated within the boundaries of nation states (Adeniji, 2003:48). The challenge to African historians is not to shy away from universal history or deny its existence as a branch of the field. Rather, they must participate in the international discourse to shape the curriculum, methodologies and scope of the subject.

Indeed, the imperative for the above course of action is unassailable, for, without doubt, the global system is entering a new era. The end of the 20th century has ushered in unprecedented and largely unanticipated

changes. Thus, the reunification of Germany with the fall of the Berlin wall; the end of apartheid in South African and the election of Nelson Mandela as the first black president of the country, the collapse of the Soviet Union as a super power nation, the widespread adoption of market reform programmes as dictated and supervised by the Bretton Woods Institutions and the emergence of the United States at the hegemonic military power in the world (Jackson, 1995: pp. 59-86) all these merely adumbrate the dramatic changes that have taken place in the last thirty years or so on the international scene. As well, we can add the renewed role for the United Nations, especially in the area of humanitarian relief, peacekeeping and peacemaking, the redundancy of nonalignment as a political/ideological posture in global power relations, the drastic alteration of cold war based on foreign policy platforms and above all the new economic alignments “towards one or others of large economic markets the U.S., the European Union (EU) and Japan (Ihonvbere, 1997:292).

One major featured of the new globalization is the increasing powerlessness of the State, at least, as far as regulating the movement of information, ideas, capital and even skills, is concerned. Rapid changes in information technology have greatly impacted on the autonomy, capabilities and spheres of action open to the nation states. Boutros Boutros Ghali, former UN Secretary-General has observed that “the time of absolute and exclusive sovereignty ... has passed” and states must “find a balance between the needs of good internal governance and the requirements of an ever more interdependent world” (Kaplan, 1994: pp. 44-76; Homes, 1993).

The extended discussion of Africa and globalization brings to the fore the need for African, nay Nigerian historians, to escape from the cocoon of the pre-colonial and colonial historiography which many has embraced. If the challenge of writing universal history is “to find in the diversity of materials and languages, common experiences and explanations of the human past,” surely this is not beyond the capacity of Nigerian historians (Oduntan, 2001:123). An incredible amount of source materials have been gathered and are available for anyone interested in the field. Perhaps as

Nigerian historians take up the challenge, we might have a truly credible global history, or at least a universal history from a Nigerian perspective. Many Nigerian scholars have expressed the same reservations about the restrictions in African historiography. The words of Professor G.O. Olusanya in explaining why African historians have not contributed meaningfully to African politics and Pan-Africanism, captures this reservation:

There has been too much concentration on the colonial period, too much emphasis on local and national history and little or no effort at looking at African history from a Pan-African and/or world context perspective (Olusanya, 1984:14).

It is my firm conviction that the historian in any part of the globe must be prepared to imbibe the idea of world history in order to broaden his intellectual horizon (Toynbee, 1954; McNeil, 1991; Mazlish and Bultjens, 1993). By strengthening the non-African history components of our programme, Nigerian historians would thus have widened their focus beyond the plainly political or economic topics to include themes which in the middle of the 20th century would have appeared to the orthodox historian as esoteric or simply mundane. I have in mind such environmental issues problems like deforestation and pollution, medical issues like HIV/AIDS and infant and maternal mortality, social menace such as drug peddling, child trafficking and cultism or even ethical issues involved in genetic engineering relating to cloning and the production of new foods, etc. The historical approach will be of relevance to intervention strategies. By so doing, the Nigerian historian would have succeeded in deploying tomorrow's weapon for tomorrow's battle.

To be sure, universal history does not preclude hemisphere, national or local histories. In fact, these sorts provide the insights that are aggregated in universal history. For this reason, Nigerian historians must continue the accumulation of historical data to increase the African data stock for universal history. The question is not whether we approve of it or not; universal history is written and will continue to be written. Global forces are at work and they require global perspectives to deal with.

Concluding Remarks

What have we learned thus far? We have learned that contrary to the initial prevailing Eurocentric view, Africans do have a history, and a proud one at that. We have learned that African historians indeed played a heroic role in the struggle for decolonization and independence in African by giving the struggle the much needed ideological fillip. We have learned that following the attainment of independence, history as an academic discipline experienced a decline from which it is yet to recover.

We have therefore argued that for history to regain its lost pride, Nigerian historians must utilize two potent weapons. First, they must desist from shying away from discussing contemporary issues. We must accept the admonition of that great French philosopher to the effect that “those who study too curiously the actions of antiquity are ignorant of what is done among ourselves today” (quoted in Collingwood, 1946 (1993):49). Secondly, we must embrace the study of universal history in order to broaden our intellectual horizon. This is especially important if we must derive relevance in the new globalization. It is my considered conviction that if we do these, we would have been fighting tomorrow’s battle with tomorrow’s weapon.

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