



History: The Epicentre of National Integration

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Abstract

This paper seeks to espouse the role of history, especially, the Nigerian history, as a fulcrum of national integration. Like the oil that makes two or more objects to glide with less friction, so is the role of history in national integration, especially, in a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria. History vis-à-vis the Nigerian history, have been relegated to the background in Nigeria's educational system, especially, at the secondary and university levels in recent times. There has been a total abdication of the discipline of history even in Nigeria's political space. Similarly, many Nigerians are historically apathetic to the discipline of history and the role it plays in enhancing national integration. Little wonder, concerted efforts by government to achieve national integration over the years have yielded little or no result. This paper, therefore, seeks to highlights the role that Nigerian history can play in promoting national integration among the various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. The paper is a historical research that adopts historical methodology in its analysis. The findings of the paper reveal that because many Nigerians are historically apathetic and remain so, the task of national integration has become a herculean one. The findings also reveal that due to dearth of historical consciousness and knowledge, Nigeria's ethnic nationalities see themselves as strange bedfellows with no historical ties. The paper, therefore, concludes that Nigerians are not strange bedfellows and that Nigeria and her ethnic nationalities are a product of history. It has also concluded that with a sense of history, Nigerians would understand themselves better thereby enhancing national integration. The paper

recommends that government should make the study of history compulsory at all levels of her education so as to increase historical consciousness among the various ethnic nationalities.

Key Words: History, Nigerian History, National Integration, Historically Apathetic, Multicultural societies.

Introduction

It is common knowledge that Nigeria is a British creation. This was achieved in 1914 when the northern and southern protectorates of the country were amalgamated and christened Nigeria without due consultation of the ethnic nationalities by the British. This position is aptly corroborated by Obaro Ikime's postulation that:

Colonial rule it was which created the colonial state known as Nigeria. Colonial rule brought our people together in new ways and for new purposes.... In many ways, the Nigerian state in which we now live is a carry-over of the colonial state. The British did not consult us before they put us together as Nigeria as western Nigeria or as Warri Province. They saw governance mainly in terms of the maintenance of law and order so that Nigeria could be effectively exploited for the benefit of Great Britain (178, 197).

It is important to note that our modern collectivity called Nigeria is the result of a 'slow' historical process which mirrors the historical experiences of the diverse ethnic groups, which in a myriad of inter connected events, have contributed to the emergence of a unique Nigerian culture. In other words, modern Nigeria is an amalgam of the various pre-colonial states and past civilizations. The same conclusion is true of other great nations of the world (Erim 2).

However, during the period of decolonization, history was at the centre of the nationalists struggle and the discipline of history was sought after with passion not only in Nigeria but on the continent of

Africa as well. It was a period one could easily term the dark age of Nigerian and African history with dearth of written historical documents. Little wonder, most Europeans adventurers who came during these periods concluded that Africa had no history, that history begins when men began writing. One of such proponents was Hugh Trevor-Roper, a professor of modern history who claimed that: "Africa has not history other than such history as centred on the activities of her European invaders" (Uya 2).

It must be noted here that the main thrust of this paper is not to delve into unnecessary gyrations about the comment of some over ecstatic Eurocentric scholars on the argument whether Africa had history or not. However, the aim is to provide a background to understanding the journey Nigerian and indeed African history has embarked upon so far. Perhaps, the above assertion emboldened Africa's and Nigeria's first, second and third generation historians among whom include, Late professors Kenneth Onwuka Dike, Adiele Afigbo, Okon Edet Uya, Abdullahi Smith and Bala Usman. Others include, Professors Festus Ade Ajayi, Obaro Ikime, Emmanuel Ayandele to mention but a few.

These pioneer Nigerian historians carved a niche for Nigerian and African history and made history an enviable discipline. Africanist, and indeed Nigerian historians questioned and challenged with vigour, the wild generalizations of eurocentricism. For instance, Uya was one Nigerian scholar who questioned Trevor-Roper's eccentricities in scholarship:

What kind of perspective and methodological approach could lead one to argue that a substantial portion of the human race who had always lived their own lives consistent with the dictates of their environment had no history? (2).

An attempt to provide answers to the above question and assertion will deflate the focus of this paper, hence, there is need to leave such

a discussion for another day. In those glorious days when Nigerian scholars upheld the study of history, there was unity and progress towards national integration. A shift from that path is leading the country to rancor, acrimony and divisiveness. Be that as it may, it is obvious that recent events in Nigeria points to the fact that history has been relegated to the bottom rung of academic disciplines. In history, the tools for national integration is embedded, ignoring it could lead to hardship and slow progress. This callous disposition toward history appalled Femi Fani Kayode when he posits that:

No group of people that I am aware of in the world today suffer more from this strange affliction and this willful attempt to ignore or to distort their own history as much as Nigerians. To make matters worse, the average Nigerian honestly believes that history does not matter and that the fact that history is not taught in Nigerian schools is no big deal. Is it any wonder that we are in a mess? They say that those that do not know or do not learn from their own history are bound to repeat its mistakes. And nowhere has this truism found more relevance and veracity as it has in modern-day Nigeria. Some of the consequences of this unfortunate mindset is the fact that the manifestation of crass ignorance and the expression of pure falsehood has taken pride of place and has become commonplace in our country when we talk about our past (<http://www.femifanikayode.org>).

There is also the need to emphasize here that any nation and especially multi-ethnic nations that ignores its history does that at her on peril. The relevance of history and Nigerian history in national integration cannot be overemphasized.

The Concept of History

For purposes of clarity, attempt will be made to define the various concepts used in this paper.

So many scholars have attempted to define history based on their prismatic lenses. An attempt will be made to consider a few of those definitions as it relates to this discuss.

History is the reflection or mirror of the society. It constantly reminds us of where we are failing or getting it right. It is always in constant interaction with the past. This was why the English historian, Edward Hallet Carr in his *What is History* defines it as, an unending dialogue between the present and the past” (30).

David S. Landes of Harvard University and Charles Tilly of the University of Michigan in their *History as a Social Science*, define history rather in its functional base when they maintain that, “history is the custodian of the collective memory and as such performs the important function of nourishing the collective ego”. As a discipline, they defined it “as the branch of inquiry that seeks to arrive at an accurate account and valid understanding of the past” (7). Thomas Mann in a rather expository manner posits that:

History is that which has happened and that which goes on happening in time. But also it is the stratified record upon which we set our feet, the ground beneath us; and the deeper the roots of our being go down into the layers that lie below and beyond ... the confines of our ego, yet at the same time feed and condition it, ... the heavier is our life with thought and the weightier is the soul of our flesh (Szasz, F.M. www.hnn.us/articles/1328).

Nigerian History

Like in any multi-ethnic society, the history of Nigeria prior to amalgamation constitutes the history of the cultures, identities, interactions both inter and intra, conflicts and the cosmologies of the various nationalities that had hitherto occupied this geographical

location now called Nigeria. This, therefore, is what constitutes Nigerian history. It therefore amount to an aberration or a misnomer for someone to argue that one can only talk of Nigerian history after 1914. This is to say for instance, that one can only talk of American History from the period of Christopher Columbus or the formation of the 13 original colonies with sheer pretentious silence on the aborigines (Red Indians) who had hitherto occupied that geographical enclave call America.

Analysing History of heterogeneous societies is completely different from that of homogenous societies which are few. In plural societies like Nigeria, there is need for a holistic cognizance of the various groups that have occupied it. In this regard, one cannot discuss Nigerian history even now in a cluster. There is need for compartmentalization, considering the complexities that might have ensued from the various inter-group relations that had existed in the past. More significantly, the uniqueness of each of the histories and cultures of these various groups in Nigeria calls for separate attention in discussing Nigerian history. Nigerian history is therefore the history of the various ethnic groups that belong to it, their origins, migrations, settlements, cultures and cosmologies, economic, social and political institutions that distinguished them from those of other groups prior to, and after colonial rule to the contemporary period.

Again, the period prior to amalgamation was a period of kingdoms and empires in centralized societies and autonomous communities mostly in 'acephalous' societies. For instance, there was the Oyo Empire, Bini Kingdom, Kwararafa Kingdom, Sokoto Caliphate etc. The point here is that prior to amalgamation, the various groups that inhabited this present location now call Nigeria were never in splendid isolation from themselves. There were inter-group relations to these effects, though piecemeal as they might have appeared the ripples they created either in time of peace or conflict where immense.

The nationalities (what we, today, refer to as ethnic groups), which today constitute Nigeria, is a products of history. The Hausa-speaking people now in Nigeria did not regard themselves as one ethnic group

in the 18th century. Those we, today, refer to as Hausa-Fulani is supremely a product of the Sokoto Jihad of the 19th century and the emergence of the Nigerian colonial state. Even much smaller groups did not see themselves as a unified single group until they found themselves in what is now Nigeria and had to seek for an identity beyond the “clan” level. It is history that has led to the emergence of our various ethnic nationalities as we know them today (Ikime, 292).

National Integration

Philip E. Jacob and Henry Tenue define national integration as “a relationship of community among people within the same political entity... a state of mind or disposition to be cohesive, to act together, to be committed to mutual programmes” (9). Again Donald G. Morrison *et al.*, cited in Emmanuel O. Ojo, defines it as a process. He asserts that; national integration is:

a process by which members of a social system (citizens for our purpose) develop linkages and location so that boundaries of sub systems become less consequential in affecting behaviour. In this process, members of the social system develop an escalating sequence of contact, cooperation and community (386).

Several steps have been taken to achieve national integration. For instance, the quota system was evolved partly to recognize and cater for the needs of all the ethnic groups through equal representation, and partly to reduce the domination by any region or ethnic group of the allocation of offices or economic resources (Julius 417). Despite these efforts, national integration seems elusive. This inability to achieve national integration might largely be attributed to the fact Nigerian ethnic nationalities owed allegiance to their different ethnic groups as a result of their primordial and cultural setting. That is ethno-nationalism. For instance, the centralized kingdoms, such as Oyo, Benin, Nupe, Jukun, the Hausa States and the Igbo societies,

were not constituted as nation-states; therefore the concept of national consciousness or integration was non-existent. As a consequence, it has been difficult to bring the societies together under a national political organization, which would mean placing national interest above ethnic loyalty (Julius 408-409). More so, frequent competition among the major ethnic nationalities and the claim of marginalization by the minorities had consistently weakened the process of national integration.

The epicentre of history vis-à-vis Nigerian history in national integration

Having explained the concept used in this paper, it is necessary to adumbrate on the role of history in national integration. It was Obaro Ikime who once posited that “we do not study the past merely for its own sake. History for history sake is history for nothing sake. We study the past because it has a relevance for the present” (207).

The epicentre of history in national integration was succinctly captured by Nigeria’s education Minister, Malam Adamu Adamu, when he reportedly declared in Abuja while addressing delegates of the 61st meeting of the National Council on Education Ministerial Session.

“It is only the study of history, our own history that can explain and give meaning to our very humanity and that is why we must study it and teach our little ones. It is also not enough that they merely know who they are, we must teach them about their God (<http://www.thetidenewsonline.com/>).

All ethnic groups, it may be argued, are a product of history. “Historical events have created all the basic human groupings—countries, religions, classes and all the loyalties that attach to these”. And again, “it is the events recorded in history that have generated all the emotions, the values, the ideals that make life meaningful, that have given men something to live for, struggle over, die for” (Ikime

281). This implies that all people need the knowledge of history for them to understand how things have come to be as they are. Onigu Otite believed that Nigeria's three language families or socio-cultural units had evolved over centuries of diverse historical experiences in different geographical regions into the more recent and complex heterogeneity of nationhood and culture. At some point in time, states, empires and complex societies, developed (Onigu Otite). He stressed that:

A variety of links existed between the various states and people which were the predecessors of modern Nigeria: between Kanem-Bornu, the Hausa states, Nupe, the Jukun Kingdom, the Emirates of Oyo and Benin, the Delta states and the loosely associated Ibo communities. These relationships sometimes took the form of war and enslavement. But they expressed themselves also through diplomacy, the visits of wandering scholars, the diffusion of political and religious ideas, the borrowing of techniques and above all trade ([http://www .online nigeria.com/tribes/tribes/asp](http://www.online.nigeria.com/tribes/tribes/asp)).

In the light of the above position, Otite analysed the rise and expansion of states, foreign religious incursions, slave trade and European political and economic activities, following a chronological order of seven historical periods from the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries. He argued that societies and states which:

Dominated the pre-colonial region of Nigeria communicated amongst themselves and also depended on one another. None was self-sufficient, in addition, to their relations with one another, they were exposed, in varying degrees at different periods, to influences from farther afield including Mali and Gao, Egypt and the Maghreb, Western Europe and North America (<http://www .online nigeria.com/tribes/tribes/asp>).

The various ethnic groups that occupy the pre-colonial Nigerian landscape interacted in such areas as economic, social and political between the major grassland groups comprising the Hausa, Fulani, Nupe and Northern Yoruba. While in the forest belt, a long-standing historical link had existed between the Edo of Benin with the Yoruba of Ife and Lagos. The Delta people whose territory is too swampy for crop cultivation and who in consequence, produced mainly fish and salt, carried on a sizeable trade with the forest peoples who supplied them basic foodstuffs in exchange for fish and salt (<http://www.online.nigeria.com/tribes/tribes/asp>). It is clear from the evidences that contacts existed among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria today before the amalgamation of 1914. Though these contacts and interactions were not regular, the impact it created was substantial. The same could be said of the external influences across the Sahara and Europe through the Atlantic Ocean in the years before amalgamation. Udo U. R. was not oblivious of this when he averred that:

During the last three hundred years, the peoples of Nigeria have been exposed to various influences from across the Sahara as well as from Europe. The geographical location of each group has been a major factor in the type and source of dominant influence that it has experienced (14).

The impact of these external forces and their routes of entry to different parts of the country explain why Islam has its roots in the north and Christianity in the south. By this, it is evident that nobody negotiated to be a Muslim or a Christian. It was just a product of geography and accident. The Yoruba, Igbo, Tiv, Idoma, Nupe, Bekwarra, Efik, Ibirra, Eggon, Boki, Bette, Bendi, Igala, Bachama, Mumuye, Michika, Chamba, Kuteb, Birom, Langtang, Jasawa, Gwari, Ijaw, Urhobo, Itshekiri, Ikwerre, Annang, Ibibio, Mbula and the Jukun etc, did not negotiate to belong to the religious and ethnic group that they find themselves. It is purely a product of their birth.

Similarly, in his article entitled “Nigeria: The Land and the People”, Okon. E. Uya argued that:

Indeed, the historical evidence is clear that pre-colonial Nigerians did not live in splendid isolation from one another. In the course of their migrations, many groups came into contact with one another. Besides intermarriages, settlements even when temporary, mutual cultural borrowings, short and long distance trade, and so on, tended to blur substantially the exclusive identity of the groups. Thus, a panoramic survey of the history of the major cultural and ethnic groups in Nigeria shows a tremendous degree of tolerance, mutual accommodation and borrowing among the groups (16).

Adumbrating further, Akinwunmi reminds us that:

Our pre-colonial history has shown that after all, Nigerians were not strange bedfellows as it had been presented by some. The various ethnic groups had established political, economic and social ties that had survived many centuries. These ties had been made possible by the geography of the country (33).

Ade Ajayi and Alagoa as cited by Akinwunmi unassumingly stressed that:

Nigeria is not a self-contained geographical unit.... In spite of the openness of its borders, however, there is compactness about the Nigerian geographical environment which encouraged greater movement and interaction of peoples within it than people outside it. The compactness comes principally from two factors. The first is the complementarity of the Sudan Belt and the forest zone with the intervening

transitional Middle belt dominated by the Jos Plateau (33).

With no monetary attachment or any selfish motive, Nigerian historians have over the years, tried to prove that Nigerians are no strange bedfellows as revealed in this chapter already and that no ethnic group existed in isolation of the others. They have equally provided historical evidence that our togetherness is as a result of a rich historical intercourse between the diverse groups. This again, Toyin Falola *et al.*, and Erim O. Erim maintained that:

No Nigerian group can be treated in isolation of the others. It was neither possible nor realistic for any community to ignore its neighbours. In fact, the economic and political survival of a community depended on the relationship, whether friendly or hostile, which it had with its neighbours. This could take the form of trade, diplomatic ties, and management of trade routes, boundaries and water resources and was among others.... Our modern collectivity called Nigeria is the result of a 'slow' historical process which mirrors the historical experiences of the diverse ethnic groups, which in a myriad of inter connected events, have contributed to the emergence of a unique Nigerian culture. In other words, modern Nigeria is an amalgam of the various pre-colonial states and past civilizations. The same conclusion is true of other great nations of the world (2).

Conclusion

The above narrative highlights the epicentre of history and Nigerian history in national integration. The various ethnic nationalities must understand that they are all products of history and history is needed

for the sustenance of their togetherness. Historical evidence, as espoused above, revealed that Nigerians never interacted in isolation. Finally, history is about what “we can become”. Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton uphold Holt assertion that “because history is a work in progress, it always tells us more than who we are or who we are at the moment. By marking out particular paths to the present, history also points to some possible paths to the future and forecloses others” (Linda and Keith, 2). In a more simplified manner regarding the usefulness of history, it highlights that the challenges of the present have their roots in the past and untangling those roots would not only be freeing, integrative but also empowering and progressive. Therefore, if the various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria are going to make any meaningful progress, as a nation which is needed now more than any other time in Nigeria’s chequered history, there is need to make a deal with their past, that past is history. For 57 years of our country’s independence and more than a century of its amalgamation, a lot of water have passed under the bridge with many questions begging for answers on how to solve the challenges of corruption, ethnicity, religion, regionalism, leadership, our value system and of course our unity. The name-calling of the country as a “zoo” or “a mistake of 1914”, the rise of militancy and separatist agitations in the various regions of the country are all assertions and movement based on failed expectations and they principally emanated from lack of historical consciousness. This is why this paper recommends that there is need for the re-introduction of history at all level of Nigeria’s educational system.

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