



Historical Scholarship in Nigeria Since the 1950's: A Challenge to Historians

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the rise and development of History as an academic discipline in Nigeria since the 1950's. The years between the 1950's and the 1980's were years when historical studies were at their peak in Nigerian universities. From the 1990's to the present witnessed the gradual decline of the discipline as a result of factors like the lack of role models, emphasis on wealth creation rather than scholarship, the rise of internet sources, the absence of images during class instruction and the merger between History and other disciplines, amongst others. This research consulted primary sources, largely obtained through personal communication with students from three Nigerian universities; and secondary source materials. It concluded by suggesting ways of reviving historical scholarship in Nigeria. The use of images and instructional materials in teaching, the constant publication of journals and history books and the attempt at making historical scholarship all embracing and relevant to the present and future needs of the society are some of the suggested ways history as a discipline can regain its pride of place as the bedrock of all disciplines.

Keywords: challenge, discipline, development, history, scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

History, an academic discipline that deals with man's study of past historical events has undergone different phases of development in Nigeria. Like every other discipline, which evolved gradually and gained recognition, history began to be studied as a discipline from the 1950's in Nigerian Universities, especially University of Ibadan which was affiliated to London. It was K. O. Dike's pioneering work, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* (1956), which charted the course of historical writing in Nigeria. Sabori Biobaku's *The Egba and Their Neighbours*, published in 1957, closely followed this. The efforts of these first generation historians paid off as the 1960's witnessed the

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rise of erudite scholars like J. F. Ade- Ajaji (1962, 1965); J. C. Anene (1960, 1966); E. A. Ayandele (1966) and Obaro Ikime (1969). These Nigerian historians who wrote in the wake of the euphoria of Nigerian independence promoted African identity and intergroup relations through their various researches as exemplified by J F Ade Ajaji's *Milestones in Nigerian History* (1962) and J. C. Anene's *Eminent Nigerians of the Nineteenth Century* (1960). The latter was aimed at illustrating the heroic deeds of Nigerians, who even in the face of Europeans colonialists demonstrated a vision, courage, competence and commitment to their independence of which we can be proud of (Ibia, 2005:84).

The tempo of historical scholarship was high and the 1970's produced even more enterprising scholarly researches through historians like E. J. Alagoa (1972), A. E. Afigbo (1972), E. A. Ayandele (1974), Tamuno (1972) and Igbafe (1979). Obaro Ikime's edited work, *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, was a major work which further enhanced historical scholarship in Nigeria and set the pace for researches in the eighties (1980). This text, although written by different scholars and from different geographical zones, covered almost all aspects of Nigeria's social, economic and political life. Aspects of colonial rule and independence were also documented. Aside these publications, the Historical Society of Nigeria, a vibrant society of Nigerian Historians, never relented in producing the annual *Journal of historical Society of Nigeria* (JHSN) and *Tarikh*. History books lay proudly to be seen in bookshops and museums and archives were bubbling with researchers seeking manuscripts for their research.

Indeed, the years between 1950 and 1980 could be described as the heydays of history as a discipline- the era when there was much enthusiasm in historical scholarship and role models like Dike, Biobaku, Anene, Ajayi, Afigbo, and Alagoa amongst others, gave pride to the discipline. It was an era when professionalism (as against mediocrity), was enthroned and scholars like Jan Vansina and Alagoa evolved a new methodological approach to historical writing, Oral tradition. Then, there was much pride in obtaining a B. A. (Hons.) in History from a Nigerian University. But all these belonged to the past, as the situation today is a far- cry from what obtained earlier. It is therefore in realization of this fact that we intend to adduce reasons for the dwindling nature of historical scholarship (especially from the nineties), and proffer solutions to these problems.

The Decline of Historical Scholarship in Nigeria

One of the reasons for the decline in historical scholarship in Nigeria is attributed to the lack of role models. It is regretful that many early generations of Nigerian historians that have given the discipline a focus and paved the way for the younger generation historians are either dead or retired from active service. These mentors and role models whom the younger historians revered have made history proud through their various researches. They include, Afigbo, Dike and Biobaku, all late, Ajayi, Uya and Awe, all

retired from active service. This is because; the new generation of historians that should narrow this margin laid more emphasis on ‘monetization’ instead of research. It is rather disturbing that the harsh economic conditions in Nigerian have made younger historians ‘searchers of wealth’ rather than ‘searchers of knowledge’. This has in turn impacted negatively on the number of books and articles being published.

The rise of the internet and the availability of various sources of information have also been challenging to historical scholarship. Many students in the University today, were born in the eighties when internet facilities were at their disposal and have come to rely on this facility to accomplish their research work. Accordingly, less emphasis is being accorded primary sources, and as Lynn Lampert rightly maintains; “the time students spend on accessing information to complete research papers and assignments appears to be decreasing, while instances of plagiarism seem to be increasing” (Lampert, 2006:23). In addition, the uses of archives and museums have continued to be de-emphasized in student’s researches resulting to the poor quality of work by students. Professional historians and teachers of history are equally guilty of the neglect of archival information in their various researches. Many Nigerian archives, although located in University towns, lack researchers either out of ignorance of their location, technological advancement (the rise of internet), or because the strenuous and boring nature of archival research is discouraging to researchers.

In furtherance to the above development the dependence on monographs and pamphlet written by university lecturers have contributed in producing lackadaisical students who prefer to be spoon-fed. Indeed, works published by the first and second generation of celebrated historians can no longer be accessed on bookshelves because of the poor reading culture of students, which discourages the re-printing of these works. Historical scholarship has also been affected by the methodology used in teaching the discipline. It is disappointing to note that in nearly all Nigerian Universities, the use of images to teach and illustrate is almost non-existent. A random students sampling, 104 in number, from the Universities of Calabar, Uyo and Port Harcourt attest to the fact that the use of images in teaching is non-existence in their various history departments. Emphasis is on the written or documentary aspect. This is the reverse in advanced countries where a scholar remarked that, “in the last few years, partly in response to what has been described by some as the “visual turn”, more historians have been paying attention to visual images in both their research and teaching” (Anna Pegler-Gordon, 2006: 28).

The use of images as sources of history is better appreciated with the following quotations:

One of our goals in teaching students to use images, therefore, should be to help them to appreciate the complexity of historical sources. When used as evidence rather than illustration, images have typically been examined for one of two conflicting but

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related purposes: they are invoked either as accurate documentary evidence or as distortions of history. Some images, namely photographs seems to make particularly strong claims of objective representations, while other pictures such as drawings and paintings are often viewed with suspicion (Anna Pegler – Gordon, 2006:29,30).

The above illustrates that images in history make the past more accessible and conveys information more quickly than a primary document written in unfamiliar or even foreign language (Anna Pegler- Gordon, 2006:28). In a bid to attract more patronage to the departments of history, especially in the face of the ever declining number of admitted students, many departments of history, from the 1990's embarked on a modification in nomenclature. The result was International Studies, International Relations, Diplomatic Studies; Strategic Studies became attractive brides to History- in Nigerian Universities. At the Universities of Calabar, Uyo, and Imo State, the Departments of History have given way to the Departments of History and International Studies while at Port Harcourt it was renamed History and Diplomatic Studies. The University of Lagos has History and Strategic Studies while Abia and Ebonyi State Universities have History and International Relations.

Positively, the merger between History and these disciplines have been very attractive to incoming students. Out of a total of Sixty-two history students interviewed in the University of Uyo, Fifty-six students claim they were attracted by the International Studies segment as they fantasized with the idea of becoming diplomats and not 'traditional' historians. Others were undecided. Although this situation has improved students admission in the department, emphasis is now placed on these newly acquired disciplines to the detriment of History because the school curricula is now geared towards watering down historical content. The situation is worse in privately owned Nigerian universities as many of these Institutions have no provision for History as a course of study because of the erroneous perception that it is no more fashionable to study the course.

External factors have also played great roles in the declining status of historical scholarship. One of these is the utter neglect of History as a subject at the primary and High school levels of education in Nigeria. This should be a source of concern to historians. Most students, at the High school level avoid studying History altogether and rather prefer Government because of the misguided conviction that the latter is easier comprehended and lacks the bogus dates associated with historical studies. The Nigerian Government on its part has made no effort (except by lip service) to ensure that History is made compulsory either at the High school or primary level where Social Studies is dominant. Twenty-two High School students who majored in the Arts were interviewed on this subject. Nineteen of them offered government in their school claiming that they were afraid of memorizing historical dates. Only three offered history. Ironically, most students whose choice of study

at the University is History have no prior knowledge of the course. This makes it difficult to perform to the expectation of their lecturers.

The Nigerian Government has continuously and consistently promoted and patronized science courses to the detriment of the arts, particularly History. The quota allocated to the former, although never filled, is usually higher. It is also pathetic to note that government scholarships and grants are strictly the preserve of science students of Engineering, Geology, Physics, Chemistry and Medicine with a few granted to Law and the social sciences, like Economics and Banking/Finance. History students have been at the receiving end of all these. This Government's attitude has rubbed off on the Oil Companies like Shell, Chevron, Agip who also grant scholarships and grants to science students to the detriment of the arts. It is only few companies like the Nigeria Liquefied and Natural Gas (NLNG) that award prizes to outstanding literary writers for their publications.

In cases of gainful employment, graduates of History have been discriminated upon. The decline in the number of history students at the High school level has made it difficult to employ more than two history teachers per school. It is only at the University level that one can still find some form of employment for history graduates. The museums and archives that could have served as sources of attraction for these graduates are wallowing in abject neglect and suffer from lack of funds, and improper storage facilities, among other problems. The above factors have posed as great challenges to historical scholarship. The next section is aimed at proffering solutions on how these challenges can be overcome in order to restore the lost glory of History as the mother of all disciplines.

The Decline of historical scholarship in Nigeria: The way forward

It is important to stress the role of historians in reviving the declining state of historical scholarship in Nigeria. Latter-day historians should be challenged by the unrelentless and fruitful attempts made by the first and second-generation historians to give the discipline a sense of direction and a pride of place among other disciplines. More effort should be geared towards breaking new grounds in historical research, evolving new methodological approaches to the study of history, publishing more articles in journals and writing more books. This would help in bridging the gap between the old and new generation of historians.

Renowned Professor of History, Okon E. Uya insists that Nigerian historians of the 21st century must brace up to the challenge of excellence in creative scholarship even in the face of distracting noises from powerful and unsympathetic outsider colleagues (Uya 2005:63). Accordingly, Nigerian historians should heed Professor E. J. Alagoa's admonition to keep the faith of historical scholarship. Keeping faith with professional mentors and colleagues' means keeping the faith of the code one has received from the profession of history (Alagoa, 2005:52). Commenting further, Alagoa states

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that keeping faith means striving for objectivity as one may be able to approximate to it within the body of evidence available for the particular work at hand, accepting responsibility for any errors or limitation, standing ready to move forward in the light of new evidence or insights.

By way of extension, the role of the parent body historians- Historical Society of Nigeria – in this regard should be to publish the *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria* and *Tarikh* more frequently as well as organize and sponsor historians to national and international conferences. The interaction with other historians in National and International conferences would widen ones horizon on new perspective to the study of History. Building on the wonderful foundation laid by the first and the second generation of Nigerian historians, the Historical Society of Nigeria must ensure that history is restored to its rightful place as a useful and usable discipline in our schools and other educational institutions. This campaign should begin with the teaching of the kind of history that can meet the needs of the present century. We must ensure that no historian regardless of his place of origin takes us back to the trenches of matters concerning the philosophy, nature, methodology and utility of African history in our efforts at nation building (Uya, 2005: 65). We should rather form themes that would explain better contemporary problems that confront our nation especially those that most likely unite the various member nationalities and thus help in making our historical studies more unifying rather than divisive”. Historians should only focus on things that divide us only as a warning to the impatient and power hungry “who may’ use false unities autonomies to ride rough over the right and feelings of minorities (Uya, 2005). To do otherwise will amount to betraying the faith the first and second generation historians have in us to continue from where they stopped. Nigerian Historians should be committed to not allowing the labour of our pioneers be in vain. In essence contemporary Nigerian historians must ensure that the light of historical scholarship does not go out of our hands.

History should not only be concerned with written sources as is usually studied in Nigerian universities. The use of images, instructional materials and audio-visuals should be encouraged while teaching so as to give students a better grasp of the subject matter. The course contents should also include field work such as visits to historical sites like museums, archives and landmarks. This would ensure that students come in contact with the living past. A visit to these historical sites would not only make the subject more intelligible but interesting and less monotonous.

Concerted efforts should be geared towards making the discipline relevant to the present and future. The trilogy of research teaching and service should be abandoned in favour of a more inclusive four part definition of scholarship (Eugene rice www.historians.org/pubs/free/Redefining_Scholarship.htm accessed 15/3/2011). Historical scholarship should be all embracing and concerned with-

1. The advancement of knowledge, essentially original research.
2. The integration of knowledge.

3. The application of knowledge.

4. The transformation of knowledge through teaching (www.historians.org/pubs/free/Redefining_Scholarship.htm accessed 15/3/2011).

What is of interest to us from Engene Rice's definition of historical scholarship is that knowledge is not to be fragmented and the history that we desire is to be all embracing totalistic and capable of solving societal problems. A second generation historian, Adiele Afigbo argues that, historians should endeavor to spend a little more time thinking about the meaning of the African past and its relevance to us today than they (were) spending ferreting out fact and still more facts about the past. The research for a usable African past capable of assisting African government which confronts the problem of our catastrophe of government remains a daunting challenge and this is where the application of historical knowledge becomes useful. In essence, history should be made relevant in the service of our community and nation building efforts. The point made above is that there should be greater commitment to the tradition of what Okon E. Uya calls the "Scholar –activist strand in historiography and scholarship.

In a similar vein, Professor Adiele Afigbo asserts that history (especially Nigerian history) should help in bringing Nigeria and Nigerians together as well as in developing and sustaining them (Afigbo 1993:3). The foregoing finds support in the report of a visitation panel to the University College, Ibadan in 1952, which recommended the introduction of an Honors school in History and based its argument on the perceived strength of history in the area of manpower production for political, administrative and many other purposes. The report states that:

An Honour course in history would be a good preparation not only for students who become specialist teacher in training colleges and schools, but also for students who will later enter political life, the administrative and government services, the churches, journalism and broadcasting commercial and industrial work and many other fields of public life (Afigbo 1999:18).

The challenge before Nigerian historians therefore is to ensure that we produce the right quality of historians and history graduates whose grounding in the discipline will ensure that wherever they find themselves in the field of work, they will operate as applied historians. Nigerian Government must also contribute its quota towards revamping the discipline which is supposed to be the bedrock of all disciplines. As a matter of urgency the government should patronize the course and ensure that it is compulsorily taught at all levels of education beginning from the primary to the tertiary institutions. Historians and history students should be granted scholarships and research grants for those interested in the discipline. Funds should also be made available to store houses of historical knowledge like the museums, archives and research institutes for the purpose of preserving historical documents and relics.

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Symposia's and memorial lectures should be organized in honour of past historical figures that have upheld the standard of the discipline.

CONCLUSION

History as an academic discipline has come a long way in the curricula of Nigerian universities especially from the 1950's. Between 1950's to the 1980's, the discipline was at its progression and recorded its best era- an era that witnessed an abundance of historical literature, enthusiastic scholars and role models who stopped at nothing in promoting historical studies. This era gradually paved way to another (the nineties to present day) where history took a downward turn as a result of both internal and external factors enumerated in the work. In order to restore the discipline to its pride of place, it is recommended, among other suggestions that attention should be paid to the use of images during class instruction and historians are urged to research further in order to produce more history books/journals. More importantly, emphasis should be placed on historical scholarship that is objective, unifying, constructive and relevant to the needs of the society. In other words, a history that is capable of solving societal problems is desired. For a nation to develop it needs to take cognizance of its past history and it is only by doing so that this generation would be assured of a better future. The old adage states that, "History repeats itself", therefore, may not altogether be acceptable because history will only repeat itself if we do not take cognizance of our past mistakes and correct them.

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