



Historical Research and Nation-Building in Africa

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ABSTRACT

History as a distinct discipline deals with a systematic study of man's past for the sole purpose of societal development. Historical research adopts the interdisciplinary model which harnesses the potentials of oral tradition, written records, archaeology and other disciplines in analyzing the socio-economic currents of society. The dream of 'African Renaissance' in the spirit of New Partnership For Africa's Development can only be realized with recourse to a diligent commitment to the study of History. There are fundamental issues that have posed critical challenges to most African countries since they gained political independence. Among these are the credible leadership question, corruption, capacity building, science and technological innovations, inter-group relations, the rule of law, civil society and human rights, conflict-resolution cum peaceful co-existence, ethno-religious crises, security, education, poverty reduction and sustainable development. There is much evidence to demonstrate that our policy makers lack historical hindsight as a viable tool for diagnosing the malaise of underdevelopment and then proffer strategies for the mitigation and possible eradication of these challenges. This paper posits that a good grasp of History remains the pivot on which human and material progress revolves.

Keywords: History, Research, Inter-disciplinary method, Nation building, Sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of nation building is synonymous with strategies adopted for the socio-economic development of any polity. For African countries in particular, there has been much concern about a pragmatic approach to the development of the continent's independent nation if which the most recent is

Historical Research and Nation-Building in Africa

the birth of the New Partnership for The Development of Africa (NEPAD). The objective and vision of NEPAD appear all encompassing as the first clause of the document cited in Assie-Lumumba & Lumumba – Kasongo (2003:6) reads thus:

The New Partnership for Africa's Development is a pledge by African leaders, based on a common vision and a firm and shared conviction that they have a pressing duty to eradicate poverty and to place their countries both individually and collectively, on a path of sustainable growth and development, and at the same time to participate actively in the world economy and body politic. The programme is anchored on the determination of Africans to extricate themselves and the continent from the malaise of underdevelopment and exclusion in a globalized world.

To further buttress the fact that the agitation for the material progress of African countries has been on the front burner, Olukoshi & Nyamnjah (2005:1) observe 'the theme of development is one, which has been central to African socio – economic and political thought and engineering in the period since the end of the Second World war, indeed it was also integral to the birth of Pan Africanism, the onset of the national Liberation project, and the launching of the post-independence social contract legitimizing covenant with the people whom they had justifiably and successfully mobilized to reject continued colonial domination' .

The accelerated inclination for Africa's development becomes more worrisome as Oyovbaire (2007:9) cites a World Bank report of February 2007 in which fifty countries like Sao Tome, Papua New Guinea, Djoubti and Uzbekistan were classified as 'failed' or 'fragile' states . The main thrust of this paper, is to showcase the role of historical research in nation building and the socio-economic development of the African continent. Unfortunately, the historical factor is often neglected or improperly anchored. While analyzing possible indicators for measuring development differentials and economic backwardness amongst select countries, Adeyemo(2003:50) hinges the problem of underdevelopment and economic backwardness in Third World Countries on corrupt leadership who demonstrate short memory of history and are unable to learn not only from their past mistakes but also from the shortcomings of developed nations in the past. An appreciation of historical underpinnings is very critical to the understanding of contemporary socio- economic realities which in turn will form the building blocks for future development strategies.

The Essence of a Nation and Nation-Building

In our discourse, we must beam our searchlight on three related terms: the nation, the state and the nation- state viz-a-vis African politics. More often than not, these terms overlap. A nation could be defined as a group of people that come under the umbrella of one government, sharing the same geographical location. It is not unlikely to find the people of a nation sharing common histories and culture. In Africa today, colonialism has provided a common historical experience for most of the nations. For example, we find

Kingdom E. Orji

Nigerians who came under British domination now share a lingua franca namely the English Language and a contiguous geographical entity with successful amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 by Lord Lugard.

It is worthy of note that the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 ensured that Africa was carved out into different 'spheres of influence' with European powers of Britain, France, Portugal, Germany etc superintending. While the intention here is not to critique the negative consequences of the balkanization of indigenous people, it must be stated that this imperialist exercise produced disarticulations in the inter-group relations of the African polity with critical implications in neo-colonial times. One typical example is the Yoruba who are found in both Nigeria and Benin Republic (old Dahomey) and the Bantu domiciled in various Southern African nations today,

Nnoli provides a legal definition of the state as an entity that shares common indices such as the same population, government, territory and the monopoly of force. From a dialectical perspective, Nnoli (1986:26) examines Hegel's position which views the state 'as 'a group which collectively protect the destiny of a people; an embodiment of political power. For Karl Marx, the major pre-occupation of the state is with the contradiction of 'social classes as the driving force of world history'. Put succinctly, Lenin (1965:7) conceives of the state as 'a product of the irreconcilability of class contradiction'. In their view, Kieh & Agbese (2008:11) observe that 'although the generic African state satisfies some of the international legal criteria for statehood (such as territory, population, government and recognition by other state), its sovereignty is highly circumscribed. It possesses all the symbols and paraphernalia of statehood such as a nation flag and a nation anthem, but it is unable to perform most of the critical functions of a modern state. It is not able to provide its citizen with the basic necessities to provide its citizens with the basic necessities of life'...

On the nature of the state in contemporary African Ake (2005:57) notes that;

The state is a specific modality of class domination, one in which class dominion is mediated by commodity exchange so that the system of institutional mechanisms of domination is differentiated and dissociated from the ruling class and even the society and appears an objective force standing alongside society. The state form of domination is the modality in which the system of mechanisms of class domination is largely independent of social classes, including the hegemonic social class.

A compound word 'nation-state' gradually made a debut in the lexicon of the Social Sciences. This must have arisen as a result of the seeming difficulty in separating the nation from state. While Reis (2004:252) acknowledges that the concepts of nation and state are extricably intertwined and delineates the fusion between the two entities, he further posits that the amalgamation of nation and state that originally took place in Western Europe and came to constitute the normal way of organizing society is among the most remarkable features of the historical process of modernization'. Axtmann

Historical Research and Nation-Building in Africa

(2004:260) outlines the historical constitution of the nation-state which comprises:

1. The territorial state and the unitary sovereign will
2. The territorial state as a homogenous nation-state
3. Democratization and popular sovereignty and
4. The global spread of the idea of nation-state.

But Usman (2008:5) holds a contrary view as he takes a swipe at the Eurocentric view of the German racio-ethnic view of the nation with the promulgation of a law which stipulates that unless you have German or Aryan blood coursing through your veins, you cannot come under the umbrella of a German nation. Usman's submission is that the concept of the nation should be seen as a political community which may be multi-ethnic and even multi-racial, but whose citizens share closely related historical experience and are bound by common citizenship and identity and see themselves and are seen by others as distinct political entity with defined territorial and other sovereign rights. Most African nations are subsumed under this definition.

The Nature of Historical Research in Africa

History as a distinct discipline interrogates past human actions in the society and subjects them to the crucible of critical analysis for living well in the present and strategizing for the future. Marshall (1990:1) notes that the object of all historical work is to trace the development of the existing complex world-society from its disconnected beginnings down to the present day? Carr (1961:19) emphasizes that historical studies proceed with the interpretation of screened facts for the purpose of reconstructing our knowledge of the past. Collingwood (1946:9) conceives of history as a scientific inquiry into past human actions which proceeds through the interpretation of evidence for the sole purpose of human self-knowledge and development. Within the definitions, we find the object, method and objective of history. Fwatshak (2007:66) highlights methodologies of historical research as it relates to organization, research/data collection, writing and documentation. Ake (1990:19) identifies the central role of history to the Social Sciences and posits that inasmuch as the primary focus of the discipline is the acquisition of knowledge of man's past activities, it holds the key to the future.

Historical evidence is derived from three main sources of history as a discipline viz; oral tradition, written records and archaeology, Vansina (1981:42) defines oral tradition as a testimony transmitted, verbally from one generation to another. In a similar vein, Hampate Bâ (1981:166) views oral tradition as the living tradition that acts as a propelling force in African history as he stresses that no attempt at penetrating the history and spirit of the African peoples is valid unless it relies on that heritage of knowledge of every kind patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, from master to disciple,

down through the ages. This heritage is not yet lost, but lies there in the memory of the last generation of great depositories, of whom it can be said, "they are the living memory of Africa" On its form, Alagoa (2006:12) notes that oral tradition is a very broad category of cultural phenomena which come into being without benefit of writing through oral expression. The fact remains that the knowledge of writing is of recent origin in Africa with the intrusion of Islam in the Trans-Saharan trade era and the advent of Christianity partially during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade epoch of the 16th-20th centuries culminating in the Legitimate Trade and colonialism of later decades. These oral testimonies are preserved among the Kikuyu of Kenya, the Bantu of South Africa, the Biiru of Rwanda, the Issa of Djibouti, the Amhara of Ethiopia, the Balanta of Guinea Bissau, the Mande of Mali, the Kwa of Ghana, the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, Ibo, Ijaw etc. of Nigeria, the Hutu and Tutsi of Burundi and many more.

Djait's (1981) work examines the nature of written sources in African history before the 15th century while that of Hrbek (1981) X-rays the period spanning the 15th century onwards. With the knowledge of writing that became widespread via the introduction of western education, virtually every African ethnic group has developed one indigenous orthography or the other but generally the knowledge of English and French versions is widespread and has become the lingua-franca in most instances. Even at this, Alagoa (1981:7) notes that in Africa, written sources are inadequate because they are restricted in range and often derived from official government sources including groups which have seized control from local communities, or the sources of the documents may be external to the African communities whose history they are supposed to record. Archaeology studies the past through the interpretation of excavated past human remains known as artifacts. Its vital role is complementary in historical reconstruction of African indigenous society.

There is a growing awareness that no single discipline can effectively tackle the challenges of reconstructing the history of Africa due to the complexity of existing data. This development calls for the inter-disciplinary approach that wields the quintessence of other disciplines in a complete whole. This is against the background of Zewde's (2000:38) observation that 'presently African history finds itself at a crucial juncture. It faces enormous challenges in the sphere of research, institution- building and organization. With regard to research agenda, there is a need to do more social history (in the broad sense of the term),

The Integrative Role of Historical Research in African Nation-Building Project

On the strategic role of history in building nations in Africa, the observation of Tosh & Lang (2006:29) becomes relevant. They reiterate the truism that 'historians explain the past in response to present day concerns and questions'. The bane of African development as Murunga (2005:8) notes is

Historical Research and Nation-Building in Africa

that, the political elites in most of Africa are historically disconnected from the concerns of the masses leading to the problem of political legitimacy. Ade-Ajayi (2008:69) records the difference between a politician and a statesman and locates it in their sense of history; the politician can only work for today but the statesman has a memory of the past and a vision of tomorrow. Even where the politician attempts a sense of history, it is for pecuniary and self serving interest.

The hallmark of historical studies is in its ability to diagnose the malaise militating against development and nation building process in Africa. This historical nexus is highlighted as one of the obstacles to the development of Third World countries in general and Africa in particular (Obafemi 2004:110). Ade-Ajayi (1995:37) provides an in-depth analysis of Africa's development crises in historical dimension which comprises the legacy of foreign conquests, the traumatic depletions of the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, the pillaging of colonization and new colonization and the abysmal failure of the post-colonial state. He further notes that the expectation that political independence would change the situation has not been fulfilled to an appreciable level.

In pursuance of sustainable solution to the teething socio-economic problems, Ilorah (2004:224) notes that NEPAD had set the year 2015 as the deadline for the panacea amidst the challenges of abject poverty, illiteracy, gender inequality, infant and maternal mortality, poor health services and environmental degradation. We are daily confronted with the ravages of ethnic crises in Africa such as was witnessed between the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi, between the Zulu and Xhosa in Southern Africa and also between the majority blacks and minority whites therein (Maphai 2000:302)

Ekeh (1989:8-9) adumbrates on the poverty of the African state and attendant 'arbitrariness arising from the scourge of economic squalor, corruption, violence which in turn emanates from malpractices in elections and the unbridled quest for political power. The current mayhem in Darfur and Southern Sudan lends credence to the position. The negative consequences of colonization are now facts of history. It has been rightly observed that if the desirable is not available, we make the available desirable. The same colonial legacy has bequeathed some common enabling features that could be harnessed in the African nation-building project namely a common language, the same geographical territory and some others. What African nations need critically today is the institutionalization of participatory democracy. In virtually all the nations of Africa ranging from Nigeria, Benin Republic, Lesotho, Kenya, Rwanda, Namibia to Libya the practice of democracy is an embarrassing suspect. The democratic structures are weak and crippled by self serving mentality that views politics as a looting spree. On the state of democratic governance in Africa, Fawole (2003:77) points out that many political leaders consigned their peoples to internal slavery and penury through corruption, mismanagement, state robbery, economic decline and patently bad governance.

Kingdom E. Orji

In addition, there must be a practical commitment to electoral reforms that would midwife credible leadership. Already there are indications of optimism in the electoral engineering as witnessed in the last elections in Kenya and Ghana with Nigeria receiving international applause for conducting free and fair elections in the April 2011 polls. Researches in history have shown that electoral violence poses a constant threat to national security in Africa.

Some urgent measures at human capacity building are very indispensable. Asante (1995:5) rephrases Professor Ade Adedeji (former Executive Secretary of Economic Commission for Africa) unflinching position that

Development refers fundamentally to human beings, to every man and woman. For development is a human experience synonymous with the fulfillment of individual, mental, emotional and physical well-being and not just the growth of things which are merely means. In other words, development is not merely a transformation of the structures and material attributes of a society. Authentic self-reliant processes of development inevitably result in the transformation of the people who bring about the change- their culture, their attributes to work, their saving and investment habits, their concept and skills and their social systems. The genuine self-reliant development of an economy brings in its trail this process of the transformation of the people.

If the suggested approach is adopted it will be centrally instrumental to curbing the spate of youth restiveness arising from unemployment and other social vices that emasculate the state. The regional integration of the various nations in Africa is very fundamental to the holistic socio-economic growth of the continent. As the historical approach has demonstrated, African nations shared common experiences in the past. Even before the advent of the colonialism, there were intergroup relations between African states. The histories of Ancient Ghana, Ancient Mali, and Songhai demonstrate this fact succinctly. Commenting on the cultural and historical foundations of identity, Falola (2003:54) notes that today the bond of poverty, long historical antiquity, the experience of imperialism and the ongoing assault on Africa's collective dignity since the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, to mention but a few are part of the shared heritage of the continent and the factors which have shaped its character and defined the problems of identity and development. While the strident strategies mapped out by African leaders under NEPAD are commendable, it must be stated unequivocally that its avowed objectives must be vigorously pursued to their logical conclusion. The erstwhile gaps between policy formulation and its implementation must be bridged for the sake of sustainable material progress and industrialization.

Drawing from the typical example of Nigeria, Akinwunmi (2009:18) underscores the need for harnessing the strength of inter-group relations in fostering the nation building project and this could have far-reaching implications for African countries in the 21st century onwards. Inter-group relations will form the pivot on which the integration of Africa economics revolve. Hence Tipoteh (1995:197) posits that:

Historical Research and Nation-Building in Africa

In the midst of perennial economic crisis where growth remains unsustainable and development elusive, economic integration can mobilize human, natural and financial resources at higher levels for investment, employment, production and consumption, large projects which cannot be set up by one or few countries can become viable through the integration of many economies. Economic integration also enhances the relative strength of the integrating economies in their bargaining with other economic groupings in the world economy.

The African Union (formerly Organization of Africa Unity), the Economic Community of Africa (ECA), the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the Africa Development Bank(ADB) are all examples of regional integration. Regional economic integration as a synergy strategy can provide a quantum leap for the quagmire economies of African nations. This paper recommends as a matter of urgency the setting up of an African Education Summit (AES) that will monitor the formulation and implementation of educational policies tailored towards self-reliance and also the establishment of an African Value Re-orientation Centre that will mentor African leaders in the art of good governance for sustainable development and nation-building. The centre will equally fight the malaise of corruption that has assumed an endemic proportion.

CONCLUSION

This paper delves into the challenges of nation-building in Africa from historical hindsight. It posits that the dreams for sustained socio-economic development could become a reality if the meaningful contributions of history research are properly harnessed. History as a distinct academic discipline provides the building blocks for the emergence of credible nation-states in Africa. The status of the nation and the essence of the systematic processes in history research have been delineated. The limitations of any single source of history either as oral tradition, written records or archaeology have brought to the fore the dire need for the adoption of the interdisciplinary methodology in the reconstruction of Africa's past.

Some of the critical factors such as the debilitating effect of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the ravages of the colonial experience, the emasculation of parochial political leadership, the crippling consequences of endemic corruption and the excruciating scourge of abject poverty that hamper the nation-building project in Africa have been subjected to the crucibles of scholarly analysis. As the way forward, this paper from historical hindsight sues for the integration of African economies at regional levels, the institutionalization of functional democratic structures, the creation of an African Education Summit and the establishment of an African Value Re-orientation Centre.

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