

*The Relevance of History in an Impoverished Society: An Analysis of a Discipline
Going into Extinction in Nigeria Since 1960*

Dr. Iyela Ajayi, Federal College of Education, Okene, Kogi State, Nigeria
Enesi Prince Habib, Federal College of Education, Okene, Kogi State, Nigeria

The European Conference on Education 2015
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The discipline of History is as old as modern educational curriculum. In the old Greek State of Athens, it was seen as a noble discipline meant for members of the Royal families and Nobles. This discipline was also adopted in Europe in the renaissance era where people were taught their roots. For this reason, seasoned historians have defined history as the mother of all disciplines because of its relevance in the development of man and the society. However, this all important discipline has become endangered in the Nigerian Society where the drive for money or material gains influences majorly the discipline one studies. In this light, most ivory towers where history is being taught were forced by the dictates of the time to affiliate the discipline with other “marketable” disciplines to attract students to study history. The impoverished status of the Nigerian society could largely be blamed for this development as economic gains now precedes academic gains. Educational pursuits are no longer for knowledge acquisition and societal development, rather, for the monetary benefits that will accrue to the certificates. Thus, the glory of history as a discipline is gradually going into extinction. This study therefore looks at the concept and relevance of history in a financially induced and impoverished society.

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Introduction

When a student in the congregation of other students in Nigeria introduces himself as a student of medicine, international relations, architecture, engineering etc., such a student is given more regards than a student who introduces himself as a student of history. This apathy towards the discipline has become so high probably because of its perceived irrelevance. Several works have been done on the relevance and irrelevance of the discipline of history in the present day Africa. Thus, the relevance of history in an impoverished society like Nigeria is worthy of studying which is the focus of this paper. To non-historians, history teaches no particular skills since the primary focus of history is the past. To young historians or prospective history students, the fear of gainful employment is the beginning of self-denigration. This fear especially, led to the call for the obliteration of history as a subject in our school curriculum. This all-important discipline has become endangered in the Nigerian Society where the drive for money or material gains influences majorly the discipline one studies. In this light, most Nigerian universities where history is being taught were forced by the dictates of the time to affiliate the discipline with other “marketable” disciplines like diplomacy, international studies, strategic studies and the likes to attract students to study history.

This paper therefore looks at the concept of history as a discipline and its importance to the society and national development. The paper also looks at poverty in Nigeria and the relevance of history in such impoverished society. It finally discusses the gradual extinction of the discipline powerfully aided by the policies of the government and the Nigerian universities.

Methodology

This research applies both the thematic and analytical method of historical reconstruction. It used the oral history method where personal interviews and informal chats are conducted. The research also made use of secondary sources such as journals, periodicals and other relevant literature.

Concept of History

History as a concept is as broad as the discipline itself. It means different things and viewed in various perspectives by different historians. History which originates from the Greek word *historia* meaning to ‘investigate’ or ‘inquire’ has been defined by Collingwood as a research or inquiry of actions of human beings that have been done in the past. In this vein, He sees history as a science that quizzed the past in a scientific manner.¹ Collingwood also postulated that history is the science of *res gestae* which is an attempt to answer questions about human actions in the past. Malcom Yapp defines history as an aspiration to comprehend the totality of past human experiences and implicitly to discern in it some messages of present and future utility on the basis of reflecting on the situation.² In essence Yapp believes that history has an inherent lesson to be learnt by the present.

E. H. Carr simply views the discipline of history as the continuous and unending interaction/dialogue between the past and the present. He opines that there was no way in which the past can be divorced from the present and vice – versa because the past and the present are intertwined and as such, there will always be an unending

relationship between them.³ He further posits that the past which a historian studies is not a dead past, but a past which in a sense is still living in the present.

Barracrough defines history as the study of the significant aspect of the past on the basis of imperfect and fragmentary evidence.⁴ Historians have come to view Barracrough's definition as thorough because it espoused the art of the historian. According to Barracrough, history is not the study of the entire past but the significant aspects of the past using evidences which cannot be sought from a single source but from various sources for the purpose of historical reconstruction.

Importance of History

The importance of history to man and his society cannot be over emphasized. History provides us with a collective memory. It gives man a sense of connection to place, time and community. History studies man and society in motion. In doing so, history aims to know the elements of the present by understanding what came to the present from the past, for the present is simply a developing past. History also concerns itself with human affairs such as politics, economics, changes and civilizations, religion, relationship and many more.⁵

You can imagine a society that does not know its history; the society will be like a man without memory, living every day like its first. History is for self-knowledge and it's just proper that a person should know himself. J. H. Clark, a historian and educator viewed history as a clock that people use in telling their political and cultural time of the day. He further said that history is a compass that people use to find themselves on the map of human geography.⁶ Marcus Mosiah Garvey, the Pan Africanist while arguing on the importance of history said that "a people without the knowledge of the past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots."⁷

One fact that is almost infallible is that no individual can run away from himself and as such, it will be impossible for any nation to estrange itself from her history. The truth however, is that nations are free to be guided by accurate sense of history and be saved or neglect history and be destroyed as it was clearly demonstrated by Hegel when he opines that History leads the Wiseman and drags the fool.⁸ Little wonder, the former president of Nigeria, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in year 2000 stated that the problem of Nigeria is the problem of not knowing her history. According to Uzoigwe, "*History is like Mother Nature, you cannot cheat it. It hangs over the head of every nation like the sword of Damocles. It is difficult to move, but whenever it moves, it is purposive and unsmiling. It makes those who provoke it or try to cheat it pay dearly*"⁹ History is a discipline that seeks to study man and his society, it thus becomes dynamic since man and the society is not static but dynamic characters. This makes history not only focus on the past but also take a look at the present and peeps into the future if it is to keep pace with the ever changing character of man and society. It is against this backdrop that Greco opines that "to remain ignorant of things that happened before you were born is to forever remain a child."¹⁰

History has tremendously helped nations to unravel their past achievements. For instance, the discovery of the Stonehenge in Salisbury, south western England gave the British a sense of pride as they relish in the ancient civilization symbolized by the Stonehenge. Similarly, the Arabs take pride in their ancient architecture and civilization which pre-dates the western civilization.

In Africa, we have heard of the great Mali, Songhai, Ashante, Kanem-Borno and the Oyo empires; how they developed their system of administration and governance, how buoyant their economies were which negates the idea that the European colonialists brought civilization, system of administration and economic progress to Africa. Egypt also boasts of a rich heritage in their ancient technology of embalment when Europe was still in the dark ages. She also prides herself with the invention of the earliest writings – the hieroglyphics, and having one of the great pyramids which was revealed through the study of history.

Nigeria is not left out of the past achievements as the knowledge of history espoused the Nok, Oyo, Igbo and indeed the Nigerian civilization as seen in the Nok terracotta, the Oyo bronze, and the igbo-ukwu culture. Without history, how will we have known the great achievements of these Nigerian societies?

History also serves as an indispensable tool in unraveling the unknown. Things happen in societies and the inquisitive nature of history will provide its tool of research to dig for the cause of such actions. Thus, history becomes an imperative tool to fish out such hidden and unknown facts.

Man is created with a natural instinct to puzzle over his environment. Man thus looks at the beauty of the cosmic environment and tries to know the essence of their creations and why they came to be. This inquiry also takes us to the past to understand the nature of the cosmic environment.

The knowledge of history also serves as a correction tool to avoid the mistakes of the past. It is often said that history has repeated itself. That is to elucidate on the propensity of actions to boomerang if not corrected. The great errors of the past are very useful so as to put in measures to avert such mistakes. According to Voltaire, the madness of the theological quarrels of the late 11th century and the horrors that resulted if not known to the public, the disaster of that time may re-arise because no one will take plans to prevent them. The history of Adolph Hitler will prevent a nation from giving absolute powers to a ruler or an arm of government as seen in the German's parliament passing of the German enabling act of 1933 which gave legal dictatorial powers to Adolph Hitler which Hitler used to the fullest.

History also serves as a tool of comparative analysis. This is because individuals and nations desire development and progress as time advances, how do we then measure progress and development if not an analytical comparison of your past with your present? Thus, history now at this point serves as a tool of comparative analysis for individuals and societies that desire progress.

History has also been a viable tool for nation building. It is used by nation builders in the much desired unity and national integration and cohesion. The proponents of Nigerian independence deployed her rich history to forge a common front to gain independence from Britain. Nation builders in order to carry the masses along acquaint them with the struggles of the heroes past which should not be allowed to 'be in vain'. Thus, the nationalists and nation builders explored Nigeria's cultural similarities to achieve independence and nation building due to the knowledge of history.

Oyeranmi while arguing on the very essence and importance of history made the following postulations;

1. No society can develop without deep sense of its history
2. No nation can survive without knowledge of its origin and people
3. No nation can live up to its potentials without adequate knowledge of its past
4. A society that neglects its history is on the surest path to self-destruction
5. Most importantly, any people, nation, and any race that genuinely desire development, such people, such nation and such race needs the study of its past.¹¹

Poverty in Nigeria

Nigeria is a relatively large country which occupies about 923,768 square kilometers of mass land. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and indeed in the black nations of the world with a population of 140 million people based on the 2006 National Population Census and 163 million based on National Population Commission's estimates.¹² Nigeria population has been in the increase from 15.9 million people in 1911 to 140 million people in 2006.¹³

The most pathetic feature of the Nigerian society is that a majority of its members are living in a state of destitution while the remaining relatively insignificant minority, are living in affluence. These skewed economic relations do not reflect the geographic spread of resource endowment; rather, it is a product of classical greed, injustice and selfishness, which is beyond any economic principle.¹⁴ Though, it is true that where one comes from can be a strong determinant of one's economic status because of difference in opportunities and constraints but what is happening in our society today differed too much from this. Though, the incidence of poverty is much higher in rural areas than in urban centers.¹⁵

Nigeria is a poor nation both by the income and non-income dimension of poverty. The income dimension of poverty defines poverty as a situation of low income or low consumption. This has been used for constructing poverty lines.¹⁶ Accordingly, people are counted poor when their measured standard of living in terms of income or consumption is below the poverty line. The non-income dimension of poverty defines the poor as those who are unable to obtain an adequate level of education and cannot satisfy their basic health needs. They have no or limited access to basic necessities of life such as food, clothing, decent shelter, and are unable to meet social and economic obligations.¹⁷ With this, statistics have shown that over 50% of Nigerians live below one dollar per day and can also not access the basic needs of life, thus making Nigeria unarguably a poor society.¹⁸

According to the National Bureau of Statistics, in a survey conducted in 2010, the proportion of Nigerians living in poverty is increasing every year despite the much ado about the paradoxically growing Nigerian economy. Below is the statistics of the poverty incidence, estimated population, and population living in poverty over the years from 1980 to 2010.¹⁹

Year	Pov Incidence (est)	Pop Poverty(%)	Million
1980	27.2	65	17.1
1985	46.3	75	34.7
1992	42.7	91.5	39.2
1996	65.6	102.3	67.1
2004	54.4	126.3	68.7
2010	69.0	163	112.47

From the above table, it is no gainsaying that the poverty level of Nigerians is increasing at an alarming rate where about 70% of the population cannot afford shelter, lack adequate clothing and cannot access basic healthcare provision not to talk of affording a decent meal per day. This brings us to the next section of this paper which is the relevance of the discipline of history in this kind of society.

The relevance of History in an impoverished Society

Having critically examined the impoverished nature of the Nigerian society which has more than half of her population impoverished as seen above, what then is the fate of a discipline which is not a money spinner and can add little or nothing to ameliorate the financial status of her citizens. As stated elsewhere in this paper, parents will not naturally want their children to study a discipline like history because of its seemingly non-economic advantage. Parents and even students will prefer to study disciplines like Accounting, Law, Medicine, Engineering, and all other courses that are ‘marketable’; ‘marketable’ in the sense that, the employability of holders of such degrees is higher than the holders of degrees in history. In a nation where there is high rate of unemployment, the propensity to study a discipline that could make one self-reliant and self-employed is more so as to be able to set up private practice if the government job is not forthcoming. Apart from its ‘marketability’, these courses command respect amongst students and the general populace in the Nigerian society unlike history which is seen as nothing but a ‘grandmother’s tale’

It is also a common knowledge in Nigeria that parents send their children to school not because they want their children to be better citizens and contribute their quota to the nation’s development but principally to be able to cater for themselves and their families financially. University degrees therefore have been reduced to just ‘meal tickets’. Thus, the motivating factor for scholarship in Nigeria is finance and not enlightenment for national and human development. Mr. Usman Sadiq, an administrator in one of Nigeria’s universities confirmed that students’ apathy to the discipline of history is alarming. He said out of 3,550 students who applied to his university in the 2011/2012 academic session, only 4 students applied for history while disciplines like Accountancy, Economics, Law, Medicine and Pharmacy were over-subscribed. He further said that most students that ended up studying history in Nigerian Universities did not apply for history but were forced to read history when they had no other choice.²⁰ Statistics from the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board further revealed that in the last ten years, less than 0.2% of applicants who sat for the University Matriculation Examinations applied to study pure History in Nigeria’s tertiary institutions.²¹

From the fore-going, despite the enormous importance of history in the life of a society, people see the study of the discipline as a waste of time and resources as people who study history are not gainfully employed which literarily translates that

there would be little or no finances to cater for their numerous economic needs. Thus, education to the impoverished Nigerian society is nothing but a means to an end and any discipline that does not meet the goals of bringing meals to the table is not worth studying. For this reason, history is becoming endangered and gradually going into extinction. Aiding this extinction is the systematic affiliation of the discipline with perceived 'marketable' but related disciplines like diplomacy, international studies, strategic studies and the likes to attract students to study history as will be discussed below. It may interest you to note that students of history with such combined disciplines do not see themselves as historians but 'diplomats'.

From the analysis above, the discipline of history seems very irrelevant in the Nigerian impoverished society, however, the discipline cannot be totally neglected by any nation who desires progress as one of the problems of the Nigerian nation today can be traced to the failure to accord history its rightful position in the scheme of affairs. As much as this paper encourages diversification of knowledge and an Information Technology driven nation, students should also know the basis of her nationhood. Little wonder, all disciplines have a segment of its history. For example, you cannot be a student of computer science, medicine, nursing and the likes without being taught the history of computer, the evolution of medicine etc. This greatly underscores the very importance of history in the life of a nation.

Gradual extinction of History

The discipline of History among the disciplines of study is the most castigated and scorned. It is one of the most rejected courses in Nigeria's tertiary institutions. The discipline is seen as old fashioned, grandma's stories and the lots but O.E. Tangban dismissed the perception that history is old fashioned or concerns itself with just stories of the past. He succinctly puts it thus,

"History is a study of the past; it tells us what happened in the past, how it happened, and more importantly why it happened. It provides examples of the past that are relevant to contemporary challenges. Indeed, there is hardly any contemporary challenge that has no antecedents, and such antecedents are provided by history. A contemporary society or state may avoid the mistakes of the past, if and only if the policy makers and those who implement the policies make reference to history."²²

Lamenting the sorry state of the discipline and reminiscing on the years before and after independence, Obaro Ikime asserts:

*".... History and historians provided our politicians with additional ammunition for the battle against colonial rule. History gave us pride in ourselves, helped to establish us as worthy members of the comity of nations. No one in the Nigeria of those years would have dared to suggest that History is a useless discipline which should not be taught in the educational institutions of our land. The value and use of History was then appreciated by all."*²³

It is not very clear when the discipline of History began this inglorious journey to perdition, but according to Chukwuma Osakwe, the long years of military rule with its aversion to search and freedom of speech couple with the penchant for secrecy may have stifled the historian's rigor and quest for knowledge.²⁴ Osakwe also cited complications arising from the country's economic challenges. He said that economic challenge resulted in the emphasis in science and technology over disciplines such as History. The cumulative effect of the economic challenges is the emphasis parents placed on the choice of discipline their children study. They always encourage their

children to pursue a discipline that could allow for self-employment such as medicine, pharmacy, law, accountancy, architecture, engineering etc. Thus, the discipline suffers a setback as the history curriculum was practically chased out of the primary and secondary schools, and it is barely hanging on a tiny thread in Nigeria's tertiary institutions.²⁵ Attempt will be made to analyse the gradual extinction of the discipline of history through the actions or inactions of two powerful institutions – the government and the Nigerian Universities.

The government Policies

The government being influenced by the drive to be information technology compliant and sees science and technology as the driving force for a nation's development systematically neglected the same force that spring rolled them to independence and nationhood. It is now seen that modern societies has transcended beyond romancing with past relics called history to the advanced level of science and technology, ICT and globalization. And that since the human society is progressively advancing, and history has consistently continue to busy itself with the past of human society, it becomes imperative for the human society to part ways with history which has become a clog in the wheel of progress. Thus, in 1883, a Nigerian federal minister, Alhaji Bilyaminu Usman asserted that:

*“The country needs technological and result oriented education so as to prepare for the future. America and Russia did not go to the moon by studying history, philosophy, English language etc but did so by encouraging technological growth.”*²⁶

You will now realize the damage done to the discipline of history with that ministerial public pronouncement barely 23 years after the same discipline helped in the actualization of Nigeria's independence. The National Education Research Council (NERC), an agent of the government saddled with the responsibility of reviewing the curriculum of schools also over time frustrated the teaching of history. In the late 1980's only federal government owned and few state and private schools offer history in the secondary schools. The subject of history was replaced with government probably to be in tune with the dictates of the time. It is no gain saying that at this period, history has been completely erased from the curriculum of the primary schools in Nigeria. Thereafter in 2009, the subject of history was 'christened' civic studies in public and private secondary schools in Nigeria. All these policies were to muzzle out history into extinction.

A discipline as important as history in policy formulation and crisis resolution was not taken into account when delegates for the 2014 National conference was constituted to discuss the way forward for Nigeria as an entity. In a delicate and all important matter as Nigeria's sovereignty, nationhood, agitations of ethnic groups, and threat of disintegration, the historians were not even taken into account. What meaningful deliberation and resolution could be achieved without knowing what happened that led us to this fragmented state? It took the concise and agitated effort of the Historical Society of Nigeria to make a case for their representation at the National conference. As E.H. Carr rightly stated that the past which a historian studies, is not a dead past, but a past which in a sense is still living in the present. So, for the nation to move forward especially at a round table such as a conference, the professional historians needed to be consulted because they are the repository of the knowledge of the past that brought us to this present quagmire of nationhood in the first place. Nations like Nigeria where the government does not recognize the importance of historians and

history, how do you expect the ordinary citizens to treat the discipline? Thus, governmental policies set the pace for the gradual extinction of the discipline of history.

Policies of the Nigerian Universities

The Nigerian Universities also aided the gradual extinction of the discipline of history. Apart from the first generation universities and some of the second generation universities that offer pure history, all of the third generation universities, all state and private universities offer history in affiliations with those disciplines they refer as 'marketable' disciplines as stated earlier in the paper. The universities could not be solely blamed for the decadence of the discipline because the government does not provide a thriving ground for the historians. More so, the low patronage accorded the discipline made authorities of the universities to devise strategies to attract students to the discipline and it had paid off as students are now being enticed to study history because of the affiliations.

In the Kogi State University for example, when the school was established in the year 2000, the department of history was part of the foundation departments. Only three students agreed to be admitted into the department. The students agreed in the sense that they did not initially apply to read history but had no choice now as their initial choice was not given to them. Later in year 2001, students' enrolment increased to 18 in the department and as at 2010, students that enrolled to study history rose to 257. The reason for this was not farfetched as the discipline of history was affiliated to International Studies in 2001 thus attracting a large number of students whose ambition is to work as diplomats or in the Foreign Service office not as professional historians.

Conclusion

This all-important discipline of history with its attendant mechanism for providing solutions to societal and national problems have been relegated to the backdrop because of its non-money spinning nature like other disciplines such as medicine, accounting, architecture and the rest. More so, the economic status of Nigerians where about 70% of its populace are impoverished makes parents and students alike prefer disciplines which can easily fetch them gainful employment. This is so because, the mentality of the average Nigerian is that education is just a means to an end and that end is food. Thus, education has been reduced to a means to acquire just meal tickets. The lukewarm attitude with which the government handled the discipline in no small way aided the gradual extinction of the discipline. Government agencies gradually and systematically watered down the syllabus of the discipline and later reduced the mother of all subjects to civic education. It should be noted that most developed and nationally conscious nations in the world makes history of their nation a core subject which every student must study. History may look irrelevant in an impoverished society thus leading to a gradual extinction, it should be noted that History cannot be erased from every facet of an individual or nation's life because we are living history.

Endnotes

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3. E. H. Carr, *What is History*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1961, p.24
4. O. E. Tangban, *Methodology in History*, Unpublished P.G Lecture series, N.D.A., Kaduna, 2011
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8. G. W. Hegel, *Lectures on Philosophy of World History*, Translated by H. B. Nibet, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p.19
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14. T. S. Osinubi, *Urban Poverty in Nigeria: A Case Study of Agege Area of Lagos State*, An Unpublished M.A. University of Ibadan, 2003, p.3
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19. Oral Interview with Mr. Usman Sadiq, Civil Servant, 48 years, Ayingba, November 18, 2014

20. Statistics obtained from the information office, joint admission and matriculation Board, Abuja, October 2014
21. O. E. Tangban, *History and the Quest for Unity in Nigeria*, a paper presented at the third inaugural lecture of the Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna, February 2013
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23. C. Osakwe, “War, History and Tertiary Institutions” in *VUNA Journal of History and International Relations* Vol. 1, No. 1, Nigeria: Vast Publishers, 2013, p.7
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Oral Interview

Oral Interview with Mr. Usman Sadiq, Civil Servant, 48 years, Ayingba, November 18, 2014 and other people through informal chat.