

The Challenge of Resuscitating Interest in History in Contemporary Nigeria Schools: New Approaches to the Rescue

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Abstract

History plays a critical role in the political and socio-economic development of any country. In this connection, proper methods of teaching the subject constitute a crucial development discourse that cannot be overemphasized. Regrettably, the fortunes of History as a discipline nose-dived since the last two decades of the twentieth century to the opening decade of the twenty-first century because of the perceived conception of the sciences as the more crucial tools for national development. This paper examines the challenges of resuscitating interest in History in the twenty-first century and the role that new methods would play in re-awakening such interest in the discipline. The paper adopted the historical method of collection and interpretation of data. The secondary data on which this work relied would be subjected to textual and contextual analysis. The discussion is in five parts. The first section introduces the work while the second section examines the gains of History in sharpening the intellectual skills of students. The third part discusses the dilemma of the Nigeria state and the neglect of History, while the fourth part examines the methods of teaching the discipline in Nigerian schools. The concluding section of this work draws attention to the need to adopt new methods of teaching the subject so as to make it relevant in proffering solution to Nigeria's leadership and developmental challenges.

Keywords: Contemporary, History, Nigeria, Rescue, Resuscitating

Introduction

The neglect of History and its resultant journey to extinction was predicted over half a century ago.¹ Yet, authorities and those in charge of policy making did not heed to the warning. The result is that in contemporary times, students in particular, have become 'scared' of the voluminous nature and date problem in the subject. This is rather unfortunate because there is no discipline or subject that does not have elements of history. Formal education is not too old in Nigerian communities and in fact most African countries, "education in the broadest sense is not new. Indigenous African societies realized the need for integrating the young into their societies and have for generations provided some form of training and education for their youth within the framework of their social organisation, so that they can take their place within the community".²

For the Nigeria state it is even more worrisome when one considers its enormous size with a land mass of about 923,768sq.kms, an area that is size of France, Britain and Netherlands combined.³ This vastness of land mass ordinarily should have been an advantage as it could hasten social development especially in terms of space for human capital resources but the opposite seemed to have been the case with regards to the increase in the spate of corruption and poor leadership. History, which ought to have provided the 'lead way' unfortunately, "had dwindled in a Nigeria that exhibited historical amnesia in the conduct of its affairs"⁴. Additionally, by the 1980s emphasis was on how to drive the country to scientific 'heights' and hence priorities as it were, emphasised the sciences. This was not necessary because the development of any country cannot lie solely on the physical, natural and environmental sciences. History, as a core discipline in the humanities is also scientific and could indeed, aid scientific development. Folklores, which is one of the sources of oral history is vital to scientific breakthrough as countries like Japan, America, South Korea etc have benefited from its use.⁵

It needs to be noted that education in itself, is not about producing persons that would be advantaged to occupy 'big' positions in 'juicy' jobs, but one that would engender self-actualization. The effective teaching and appreciation of the value of History is one sure way of attaining this all-important goal. The question is: How effective have our teaching methods

¹ R.E. Crookall, *Handbook for History Teachers in Africa*, (London: Evans Brothers Limited, 1960), p.1

² M. Dowouna, Ghana Commissioner for Education, in his opening address at the Conference of African Education held in Mombasa, August, 1968, cited in R.E. Crookall, *Handbook for History Teacher's in Africa*,... p. 1.

³ G. Arnold, *The Resource of the Third World*, (Deaborn: Fitzroy Publishers, 2004), p. 123.

⁴ C.B.N. Ogbogbo, "Obaro Ikime, A Titan at 70" in the *Dynamics of Inter-group Relations in Nigeria since 1960: Essays in Honour of Obaro Ikime at 70*, eds. C.B.N. Ogbogbo, O.G. Muojama and R.O. Olaniyi (Ibadan: Department of History, 2012), p. 18.

⁵ Godini, .G. Darah, "How Folktales, Science can stimulate technological breakthrough" *The Guardian*, May 27, 2015.

and overall aim of education been? G.O. Olusanya, over a decade ago, quoting Professor Busia, captured it thus:

It seems to me that there is a tendency to lay a greater emphasis on what students are going to do than what they are going to be as person. Of all Africa's resources, her young people are the most valuable. Educators have a responsibility to consider what sort of human being comes out of our educational institutions, particularly the universities. In the last resort, it is that which will determine the role which Africa plays in the world. If our concept of education should enhance human dignity and freedom, that fact will affect the kind of university that is advocated, what is taught and how it is taught".⁶

It is against this background that this paper examines the challenge of teaching History in contemporary Nigerian schools and the role that new approaches would play in its improvement. The paper suggests ways of making the teaching of History interesting to attract students rather than emphasise stories of 'Rise and Fall' of empires, kingdoms, copying of lengthy notes etc that discourage students' interest in the discipline.

The Discipline of History and Students' Intellectual Growth

The issue of what constitutes history and the methods it employs have long been examined by historians and therefore, it would be needless to undertake any excursion in that area⁷. As observed by Obaro Ikime, the perception of R.V. Daniels on the discipline captures that the subject in all ages, should impress on our minds. Daniels opined that:

History is the memory of human group experience. If it is forgotten or ignored, we cease in that measure to be human. Without history, we have no knowledge of who we are or how we came to be, like victims of collective amnesia groping in the dark for our identity. 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. Historical events have created all the basic human groupings – countries, religious classes – and all the loyalties that attach to these.⁸

The relevance of history to any country is therefore, myriad. Apart from the fact that knowledge of the subject helped to provide the tool with which Nigerian nationalists fought colonialism to a halt, no meaningful in-roads could have been made in Nigeria's

⁶ Gabriel, O. Olusanya, "The Debt We Owe to the Past", A Memorial Lecture in Honour of Professor J.A. Atanda, G.O. Oguntomisin and S.A. Ajayi, eds., *Readings in Nigerian History and Culture: Essays in Memory of Professor J.A. Atanda* (Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd, 2002), p. 359.

⁷ See for instance, Godfrey N. Brown, *Living History, A Guide for Teachers in Africa* (London: Allen and Lenwin, 1963) and Jerome S. Bruner, *Towards a Theory of Instruction*, (USA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

⁸ R.V. Daniels, *Studying History, How and Why?*, 2nd edition (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc, 1972), p. 3.

developmental strides in the past without the discipline of the History.⁹ Therefore, there is the need to “maintain a proper balance between the pursuit of science and technology and the pursuit of other desiderata of national development”.¹⁰

The teaching of History in Nigerian schools is relevant for a number of reasons: first, is the patriotic consideration. Societies all over the world, whether simple or complex had ways of educating their youths. In this regards, the need to prepare the minds of the youths about their society, how it evolved, its mechanism and standards of behaviour acceptable. In order to understand the society therefore, it was not possible without knowledge of the past. Second, knowledge of history quickens the imagination of youths. Imagination, in itself, is part of the cognitive domain of knowledge.¹¹ A student for instance, who hears a vivid account of how Samori Ibn Lafiya Toure resisted French incursion into his domain, or how Horatius defended the Tiber bridge against the foes of Rome, would have their imagination stirred. Legends and stories are useful strategies to help achieve this.

Third, History also helps to encourage tolerance and enlarge sympathies, which is a crucial requirement for countries like Nigeria that is multi-ethnic. The desire for tolerance in an overcrowded country of diverse people, however, does not imply that youths should tolerate acts which are evil to others, but to appreciate both good and evil instead of judging from a narrow point of view. Even Christian doctrine emphasise the importance of truth and appreciation of the feelings of others.¹² As future statesmen, youths stand to benefit from this virtue derivable from the discipline of History.

It is important to state too, that good leadership derives largely from the background that leaders have and by extension, the maturity of such person(s). The discipline of History helps to provide that background. The knowledge of history helps to prepare youths with the ability to sift evidence and identify truth in conflicting situations. Visiting local sites (historic) is one sure way of achieving this as shown by a recent study.¹³ If education, amongst others, is to make good citizens that would impact positively on the socio-political

⁹ See the text of the Press Conference given by Professor Obaro Ikime at the 32nd Congress of the Historical Society of Nigeria, University of Jos, Nigeria, 1987, in O. Ikime, *History, The Historian and The Nation* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 2006), pp. xiv-xvi.

¹⁰ O. Ikime, *History, The Historian and The Nation...* p. xvi.

¹¹ Other aspects or domains of learning are Affective and Psychomotor.

¹² See Isaiah Chapter 11 verse 9 of the *Holy Bible*.

¹³ This method was adopted by Libby Bischof, an Assistant Professor of History at the Department of History and Political Science at the University of Southern Maine, USA. See Libby Bischof, “The Lens of the Local: Teaching and Appreciation of the Past through the Exploration of Local Sites, Landmarks and Hidden Histories” *The History Teacher*. Vol. 48, No. 3, May 2015, pp. 529-559.

and economic development of a country, History is one discipline that helps in achieving this virtue.

The Dilemma of the Nigeria State and History

Throughout the ages, instances abound to show how history has helped to mobilize people for change. For example, after the Berlin Conference of November 1884-1885, during which Africa was partitioned among European Powers such as France, England, Germany, Portugal, Italy and Belgium, Africans held their first Pan-African Conference in Manchester, England. At the end of that Conference, there was a call for organisation of mass political parties that would struggle for a socialist United States of Africa. African peoples then, used the Conference and subsequent Congresses as platforms to wage one of the most relentless struggles against colonialism. Today, most Africans at least, can heave a sigh of relief from foreign rule.

The period between 1965 and 1992 was yet another, in the United States of America. Within these years, there were rebellions in the United States, - Los Angeles, Detroit, etc. As it were, these reactions demonstrated the fact that what happens in the past would always determine future actions. The situation was so tense that the U.S. government was forced to make concessions in the 1960s and 70s. It was against this background that Orevaoghene C. Obaro, about a decade ago, noted that "History is a weapon, it can be used to inspire or demobilize people..."¹⁴ For the Nigeria state, there is need to begin to repeatedly stress the importance of history. History as a discipline emphasises truth, and this truth is the weapon that is needed to move the Nigeria state forward. As noted by Edwin Madunagu:

"The truth must be told whether or not it brings its temporary comfort. Nothing enduring can be built on falsehood. In particular, our mainstream power-blocs and politicians must know that they cannot construct the new Nigeria on falsehood, or falsification and distortion of history, not even the falsification of their own acts..."¹⁵

The unfortunate fate of the subject, history in contemporary Nigeria is its seeming decapitation. The subject is listed under the Humanities field of studies and has been infused into social studies in the revised nine-year Basic Education Curriculum (BEC). This is rather unfortunate because it would imply that what the State covertly cherishes the slavish adoption

¹⁴ Orevaoghene .V. Obaro, "History is a Weapon", *Vanguard Newspaper*, 9, August 2000, p. 35.

¹⁵ Edwin Madunagu, "Again, in defence of History", *The Guardian Newspaper*, August 5, 2010, p. 59. Also see Edwin Madunagu, "Notes on the Movement of History", *The Guardian Newspaper*, October 25, 2007, p. 65.

of foreign values and the production of youths who would know nothing about their past. Ayodeji Olukoju captured the effect of excluding history succinctly when he said, History's decapitation is a "national amnesia, which prevents the learning of lessons for development and the continuity of the process of building enduring and positive values for national development."¹⁶ The Nigeria state, as it is now, needs the lessons of history more than ever. This is particularly so because even leading countries of the world – the United States of America, China, Japan, Germany, France and the United Kingdom, have never relegated History to the background, not even in the face of industrialization and scientific technological development.

It would be recalled that soon after the attainment of political independence from Britain in 1960, the key role of history in national development was recognised by subsequent Nigerian governments until the importance of the subject suddenly nose-dived in the 1980s. Before the 1980s the Federal Government then, used grant from the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund and the Carnegie Trust of America, to establish research programmes at the University of Ibadan in 1954. Other research schemes during the period include: Northern Nigeria (1966), Eastern Nigeria (1966), Rivers State (1971), Benue Valley (1974) and Cross River State (1978). All these efforts have remained unsustainable by subsequent governments in Nigeria. This state of affairs must not be allowed to continue. Emphasis on science-related disciplines should not be allowed to dwarf the importance of History and to do so, in the words of Oyekanmi, is "simply the contrast between an old newspaper and a new one".¹⁷

It is also important to draw attention to the main weakness which pessimists of the relevance of history, seem to have anchored their views. Students' enrolment for History in Nigerian schools have dropped perhaps because of the demands of modern world in which technological break-through is seen as being more relevant. Even if technological development is desired by countries of the world, it cannot be achieved without knowledge of history. As earlier stated in this paper, the drive for technology by advanced countries of the world has not obliterated the relevance of history and its study. In fact, as recently noted by Levi Amadi concerning Canada:

"In Ontario Province for example, the study of Canadian History is compulsory for students in grade 8 and 10 which would be the equivalent of JSS 1 and 3 in the Nigeria system Before a student gets the High school diploma (the equivalent of the

¹⁶ See Rotimi L. Oyekanmi, "How History's Exclusion from school curricula aids corruption, bad governance", *The Guardian*, December 25, 2013, pp. 44-45.

¹⁷ Rotimi, Oyekanmi, "How History's Exclusion from school curricula aids corruption, bad governance" ... p. 45.

Nigerian NECO or WASC) such a student must pass the grade 10 History which is the History of Canada since 1914”.¹⁸

The problem with the Nigeria state with regards to the dwindling fortune of History as a subject offered by students appears not solely to be on the relevance of the subject alone, but also on the methods by which the subject has been taught. As Levi Amadi would argue:

“...even in the highly technologically developed world, it has been realized that technological development without a human face would only succeed in producing new Nazis whose mission can easily reverse the gain made by our technological advancements... the realization of the fact that a discipline like History gives our technological developments of human face is the beginning of developmental wisdom”.¹⁹

The problem therefore, with the Nigeria state with regards to the subject, lies in the methods of teaching it and not necessarily neglect from government alone.

Methods of Teaching History in Nigerian Schools

Methods of teaching History, it must be quickly pointed out, is quite different from the methods of studying history. While the former refers to styles of imparting or transmitting the contents and facts of the subject; the latter is more of professional ways of getting acquainted with how to study and write it. Our concern in this paper is with regards to the former. It may be argued that both are intertwined, but how well the former is managed stimulates interest in the latter. From the outflow of existing literatures on the former, visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning styles have been adopted.²⁰ Other methods include: Group work, Role play, drama, Research and Presentation method.²¹ Yet, there seem not to have been resuscitation of interest in the subject as shown in its enrolment in contemporary Nigerian schools. The implication therefore, is for teachers of the subject to devise new strategies to stimulate students' interest.

Unemployment problem is one major headache of contemporary Nigeria. Parents send their children to schools to be able to guarantee a better future for them and one of their expectations is that at the end of their studies, such children should be able to assist in the family up-keep by being gainfully employed. Against this background, sponsoring a child's

¹⁸ Levi O. Amadi, “Effective Methods of Teaching History” in L.E. Otoide, ed. *History Unlimited: Essays in Honour of Professor Abednego Ekoko*, (Benin City: Mindex Publishing Company Limited, 2012), p. 480.

¹⁹ Levi O. Amadi, “Effective Methods of Teaching History” ... p. 479.

²⁰ Levi O. Amadi, “Effective Methods of Teaching History” ... pp. 482-485.

²¹ Drew Stephen, “Using a Variety of Learning Styles in Teaching” *Heritage Explorer*, www.schoolhistory.co.uk cited in Levi O. Amadi, *supra*

education (which in most cases, gulps majority of parents' income) only for the child not to find relevance in the society, to such parents, does not desire courses like History. Yet, even those who studies science-related courses seem not to have done better in terms of being employed. The problem therefore, is not peculiar to history, but how entrepreneurial a person is, - and this may perhaps, be the justification for the existence of entrepreneurial course compulsorily taken by students in contemporary Nigeria universities. The question therefore, is: Can History be integrated into Entrepreneurial studies?. The pertinent response is in the affirmative.

If history has been perceived as “knowing about the past in order to understand the present”²² then, everything studied in the subject including production of goods and services can as well be replicated for practical appreciation. The practical application of History in entrepreneurial studies has long been suggested by scholars. For instance, Eugene .I. Nnadi, three years ago, argued that “entrepreneurship entails one doing something that is interesting, fulfilling and enjoyable...”.²³ History could help to achieve this and therefore, need to be adopted by history teachers. One of the basic aims of education is to provide an all-round development of individuals physically, socially, mentally and emotionally.²⁴ History as a discipline that mirrors the past provides guide to the present and the future, can help in this regard.

The question again, would be: how can entrepreneurial skills be built in History?. The relevant methods needed for this have long been emphasised by scholars.²⁵ The problem seem to be indifference and lack of commitment by teachers of the subject to evolve ways of making the subject interesting and productive. For a successful application of entrepreneurial skills, basic traits have to be inculcated into students. These include: being able to take calculated risks; take appropriate decisions, be goal-oriented, innovative, cope with changing situations, demonstrate resourcefulness, imagination,²⁶ etc. The realisation of these skills

²² See P. Sauvain, *Skills for British Economic and Social History* (London: Stanley Thornes Publishers Ltd., 1988)

²³ Eugene .I. Nnadi, “Integrating Entrepreneurial Skills in History in Nigerian Teacher Education”, in Dan Chukwu and Eugene I. Nnadi, eds., *Readings in the Humanities and Education*, (PortHarcourt: His Glory Publications, 2011), p. 293.

²⁴ R.D. Dickson, “An Evaluation of the Contributions of Geography Education to National Development in Nigeria”, *Zaria Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 8, No. 1, 2006, p. 31.

²⁵ See for instance, R.T. Kiyosaki, *If you want to be Rich and Happy don't go to school*, (Lagos: Elpac Publishing and Literacy Crusade, 2006), R.E. Crookall, *Handbook for History Teachers in Africa* (Ibadan: Evans Brothers History in Nigerian Teacher Education”...

²⁶ See E.U. Anyakoha, “Towards Enhancing Entrepreneurial skills of operators of Home Economics Related Business: Implications for Entrepreneurial Education” in Iloduba and N. Ezeani, eds. *Empirical Studies on Social and Economic Implications of Vocational and Technical Education in Nigeria*, (Umunze: Federal College of Education, 1995).

could be incorporated into the teaching of History right from primary up to post-secondary school levels. In order to achieve these, history teachers should incorporate skills that involve how to write history, speak, model-making, the need to avoid bias and prejudice; - a trait common in advertisement, and in fact, relate classroom teaching to practical life experience in industry, commerce and agriculture.

Conclusion

No society in the world is static. As events in the world are dynamic, the teaching of history as a subject in Nigerian Schools should also be dynamic. The age-long practice of teachers of history emphasizing dates and stressing the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires is no longer tenable in the twenty-first century. The history teacher must learn to teach his/her students/pupils from the 'known' to the 'unknown'; from 'simple' to 'complex'. It must not be reproduction of past stories alone. The ideal history teacher should be one that loves his profession and is prepared to deploy his 'all' to make the subject not only interesting by application of its subject-matter to contemporary situations, but also creative. He/she should not be the type that goes to the classroom and asks students/pupils to go and read up different chapters of books for more information, and leaves students to their fate. He/she should speak well and be a source of inspiration to his/her audience. The use of high sounding words cannot do magic, but orderly presentation of the subject-matter.

In contemporary Nigeria where the entertainment industry has become a major source of employment for youths, a proper grasp of history could even enhance better performance from comedians. Graduates of History, apart from being relevant in administrative cadres of establishments, teaching, etc, could even find gainful employment in the entertainment industry. The list is inexhaustive. To be a successful entrepreneur, activity is a key factor and if history ordinarily emphasises activities on the part of the learner, then, history is the asset needed. Proper methods of teaching history therefore, could stimulate interest of students and prepare them for the challenges of the twenty-first century Nigeria. As rightly observed by Levi Amadi, "the understanding of any discipline is rooted in the teaching methods adopted by the teacher to teach the students".²⁷ Teachers of History in Nigerian schools need to change their methods of teaching the subject in order to check the decapitation of the subject.

²⁷ Levi .O. Amadi, "Effective Methods of Teaching History" ... p. 486.

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