



HISTORY, NATIONAL INTEREST, AND NATION-BUILDING IN NIGERIA: A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT: *A crucial aspect of nation-building in Nigeria is the understanding of key issues in the philosophy of history. However, this dimension of historical study is often neglected, both by historians – due to its complex ideological nature – and by the broader society, where it is largely absent from intellectual discourse. Yet, history is a dynamic force, shaping human action across three interwoven temporal dimensions: the past, present, and future. A deep engagement with the past enables individuals and societies to appreciate their present circumstances and intentionally shape a better future. While history cannot predict the future with certainty, an unplanned and unstructured future offers little hope for progress. This paper examines the ‘missing link’ in Nigeria’s nation-building process – namely, the absence of a genuine national interest. This deficiency stems from indiscipline, ethnic and religious divisions, greed, pervasive corruption, and a general disregard for both historical consciousness and long-term vision. These factors have collectively eroded national cohesion, exacerbated crises, and deepened socio-political instability, leaving the country vulnerable to further deterioration. The paper argues that unless this ‘missing link’ is addressed, and its underlying issues systematically resolved, Nigeria’s aspirations for sustainable development will remain elusive. The continued neglect of these challenges may lead to escalating crises and potential fragmentation. The study draws on a range of books and articles on the philosophy of history, sourced from various libraries, alongside insights from discussions with history experts. Additionally, relevant internet sources were consulted, with careful consideration of their reliability and accuracy.*

KEYWORDS: National Interest, Philosophy of History, Nigeria, Nation Building.



INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of history, though primarily an intellectual pursuit rooted in complex ideological reasoning, also shapes and gives coherence to human life. As a branch of historical studies, it is diverse, intricate, dynamic, and at times, controversial. However, it constitutes a finite body of knowledge that can be best understood through three broad, yet overlapping, areas. These include: the meaning of history, which is deeply intertwined with human existence and progress; the methodologies of history as a discipline, including historical reconstruction; and the significance and relevance of history to human advancement and development. Every other aspect of the philosophy of history can be situated within one of these categories. The present study falls under the first category, which explores not only the literal and contextual meanings of history but also its nature, evolution, and the various schools of thought associated with it. Specifically, this study focuses on understanding the past, present, and future in the progression of history and society.

As they unfold in an ongoing continuum, the past, present, and future collectively shape individuals and societies. Within this temporal flow, reflections on past human experiences – whether within a specific culture or region – are essential for understanding the present and strategically planning for a better future. While history, unlike the natural sciences, lacks fixed laws that allow for precise predictions of future events, it nonetheless demonstrates that the past and present significantly influence what lies ahead.¹ Building on this understanding, this paper explores the ‘missing link’ that has hindered Nigeria’s nation-building efforts since independence.

The ‘missing link’ in Nigeria’s nation-building process stems primarily from the absence of a clearly defined and actively pursued national interest. This void has been perpetuated by the rise and entrenchment of poor leadership, pervasive corruption, and systemic injustice—each driven by selfishness, greed, and a disregard for both the nation's past and its future. Over time, these factors have deeply influenced the thoughts and behaviors of many, exacerbating crises, worsening socio-political instability, and casting uncertainty over the country's future. These challenges manifest in widespread insecurity, ethno-religious violence, extreme poverty, and insurgency, among other issues that continue to afflict the nation. This paper argues that unless this ‘missing link’ is addressed and its underlying causes effectively tackled, nation-building in Nigeria will remain an illusion. However, before presenting evidence to support this argument, it is essential to first examine the interplay of the past, present, and future as a foundational concept in the philosophy of history.

The Past, the Present and the Future: A Philosophy of History

History is the study of human existence on Earth. It tracing human evolution in tandem with production and social relations, which sustain life. It encompasses both the natural world and its impact on human survival – such as natural disasters, floods, diseases, predators, and access to essential resources like food, water, and shelter. It equally entails the social dimensions of human life, including psychology, intellectual development, political and social structures, medical advancements, and institutional growth. Within this interplay of natural and human-

¹ For related discourse, see A. I. Yandaki, “Borders and Border Disputes in the Academics: History Amongst the Social Sciences and Historians Amidst Imperialised Mentalities”, in A. I. Yandaki and Y. Abubakar, *The Consequences of Being a Historian: Thoughts and Reflections of Students and Practitioners of History*, Sokoto, UDUS Press, 2018, pp. 5-6.



driven factors, historical events emerge from human activities. These, in turn, form the focus of both students of history and professional historians.²

Historical events unfold in a continuous flow of time, inevitably becoming part of the past the moment they occur. Within this constant flux, significant social changes emerge, shaping successive generations. Thus, history can be understood as the study of past human events as they unfold across different epochs – whether ancient, recent, or contemporary. However, no epoch abruptly ends to be replaced by another; instead, historical events and human progress follow a sequential pattern, forming a chronology that moves from the past into the present and ultimately shapes the future. In this way, history dictates a continuum that links these three temporal dimensions. Therefore, history can also be defined as the study of past processes – whether social, political, economic, or intellectual – that give rise to the present and influence the trajectory of the future.³

What is crucial to understand here is that, unlike debates over objectivity, facts, truth, theorization, and interpretation – on which historians have never reached a consensus⁴ – the continuous movement of societies and all their accompanying dynamics through the passage of time, thereby shaping history, has rarely been contested. It is no surprise, then, that it is widely accepted that:

If there is any sacred law in history, it is the law of progression and motion, as the present moves fast into the future and just as the future would be an immediate present and the present regress into the past; and either way, in quick succession...⁵

The past, present, and future are rarely examined as a central intellectual framework outside the philosophical study of history. Nevertheless, two key questions frequently arise even in this context: Is the past relevant to the present and the future? And which temporal dimension – the past, present, or future – is most important to the historian? Regarding the first question, it is now evident that viewing the past as irrelevant or considering history – a discipline fundamentally focused on past human events – as a pursuit with no practical significance is a futile perspective. As Swai insightfully reveals,

History (and by extension the ‘past’) is more than a source of recipes and lessons. Man recalls, describes, and interprets *the past* as a way of coming to grips with prevailing exigencies and also be the better able to determine the kind of *future* he would like to realize... History (investigation on the past) then becomes a way of putting into the hands of the living the capacity to *transform circumstances and selves*...⁶ (emphasis, mine)

Regarding the second question, it is evident that the past, present, and future are all essential to the historian. The past serves as a foundation – it must be revisited, studied thoroughly, and

² For more details on what history entails, see E. H. Carr, *What is History*, England, Penguin Books, reprinted, 1984.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ With regards to these and many other pressing question, it was believed that “historians castigate and heavily criticize one another, sometimes almost to the point of excommunication”. See A. I. Yandaki, *Borders and Border Disputes in the Academics...*

⁵ B. Swai, “The Past, Present and Future”, quoted in A. I. Yandaki, *The State in Africa: A Critical Study in Historiography and Political Philosophy*, Zaria, Gaskiya Corporation Ltd., 2015, p. 227.

⁶ B. Swai, “African History: A Tool for Nation-Building and Development?”, Being a Paper Presented at the Congress of the Historical Society of Nigeria, Sokoto, 1991, p. 2.



understood to navigate the present, though it should not confine us. The present holds great significance, as it is a fleeting but decisive phase that swiftly transitions into the future and just as quickly becomes the past. Meanwhile, the future represents the realm of continuity and action; though it cannot be precisely determined, it can be significantly influenced. The following section of this paper examines the origins of Nigeria's nation-building challenges through the lens of this temporal framework – considering the interplay of the past, present, and future.

Genesis of the Problem: A Review of the Nigerian Leadership

The people inhabiting what is now Nigeria, whose historical trajectory was disrupted by colonialism at the dawn of the 20th century, have since independence in 1960 remained subject to the unyielding flow of historical continuity. The journey toward nation-building – an inevitable process in the passage of time – began with nationalism during the colonial period. Nigerian nationalism, an all-round movement, was primarily driven by the struggle for emancipation from colonial rule, particularly in the post-war era, with the ultimate goal of fostering nation-building. This movement strategically drew upon Nigeria's remote and recent *pasts* – highlighting the histories of ancient kingdoms and empires – to challenge colonial historiography and justify the anti-colonial struggle in the nationalists' *present*. In doing so, it not only reinforced the fight against colonialism but also projected a vision for a better *future* – first through the attainment of independence and subsequently through vision for national growth and development.

Having gained independence largely due to the advantages of the past, the First Republic emerged, though it faced numerous challenges that ultimately led to its collapse. These challenges included Nigerian leaders inheriting colonial superstructures, adopting colonial capitalist-oriented socio-economic systems and practices, and grappling with internal regionalism, which had been embedded and reinforced by colonial constitutions.⁷ Yet, any attempt to alter the colonially established status quo – rooted in exploitation and later evolving into neo-colonialism – posed significant risks. This was particularly evident in the country's economic foundation at independence, which relied heavily on agricultural exports such as cotton, cocoa, palm produce, and groundnuts. These commodities were sold and processed abroad, primarily in Western capitalist nations, to support the newly independent state.⁸ The first republic also faced ethno-religious and politically motivated crises, including minority rights disputes, the contentious 1962 national census, the Action Group crisis, and the Federal election crisis of 1963.⁹

Nevertheless, despite their human flaws, nationalist leaders such as Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, and Sir Ahmadu Bello (Sardauna of Sokoto) remained dedicated to the service and well-being of their people, at least within their respective regions, and demonstrated considerable vision. Drawing on lessons from the past, they navigated these challenges while remaining committed to the rigorous task of nation-building, striving to secure a better future. In the Northern Region, for instance, Premier Sir Ahmadu Bello spearheaded the conception and effective implementation of the

⁷ See A. I. Yandaki, *The State in Africa...*

⁸ M. L. Arabu, "An Assessment of Nigeria's Relations with the International Community, 1950-1975", *Kano Journal of History*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2014, p. 79.

⁹ See U. Faruk, *The Victors and Vanquished of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970: Triumph of Truth and Valour over Greed and Ambition*, Zaria, ABU Press, 2011.



Northernization policy—a visionary initiative that, in various forms, was also believed to have been quietly pursued in the Western and Eastern regions.¹⁰ The Northernization policy, though, viewed differently by different groups of people, was put in place by its architects basically to ensure the overall development of the Northern Region (in terms of education, economy, civil service, and so on) and average Northerners, irrespective of tribe or religion.¹¹ As everyone was carried along, even the pluralistic North was considerably united and the question of minorities considerably managed, despite its periodic resurgence. Transcending the regional boundaries, the First National Development Plan, 1962-1980 was formulated to move the country forward from all angles.¹² All these, however, were cut short by the abrupt ending of the First Republic.

The First Republic came to a chaotic end following what later appeared to be an Igbo-led military coup, which brought General Aguiyi-Ironsi to power in January 1966. This, along with the seemingly Northern-driven counter-coup of June 1966, was among the key events that ultimately plunged the nation into a thirty-month Civil War from 1967 to 1970.¹³ While the Federal Government under General Yakubu Gowon deserves recognition for its efforts to preserve national unity against the aspirations of the secessionists, the war inflicted significant losses in lives and property, necessitating a period of national reconstruction.¹⁴ In response, Gowon initiated the Second National Development Plan (1970–1974) to aid recovery.¹⁵ During this period, the country experienced an oil boom that, throughout the 1970s, generated substantial revenue for the national treasury. However, this newfound wealth gradually led to the decline of government-supported agricultural activities, paving the way for the emergence of a mono-cultural economy heavily dependent on crude oil – an economic trajectory whose negative consequences, compounded by poor leadership, continue to affect the nation today.¹⁶

From the onset of the oil boom in the 1970s, Nigerian leadership – when examined beyond appearances to its true essence – gradually became anything but positive, with only a few exceptions. The country experienced an era of immense wealth, to the extent that it was once remarked that Nigeria’s problem was not a lack of money but how to spend it.¹⁷ As Ibn Khaldun observed, corruption and injustice often stem from “the passion for luxurious living within the ruling group,” which drives them to engage in corrupt practices to sustain their extravagant

¹⁰ According to Paden, “The observation is further made that the Southern regions were pursuing the same policy (similar to Northernization), but without spelling it out. There would not be a Hausa messenger in the government offices in Enugu even though there was a big Hausa community there.” J. Paden, *Ahmadu Bello, Sardauna of Sokoto: Values and Leadership in Nigeria*, Zaria, Hudahuda Publishing Company, 1982, p. 256. It should, however, be noted that the emphasis here is not on the consciousness of differences these policies might have furthered, but the concern of the leaders for the present and future development of at least, the people of their respective regions, which is hardly seen today.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² For details on the First National Development Plan, See O. E. Anthony, *Political Economy of Nigeria*, Onitsha, Bookpoint Ltd., 2005, pp. 136-140.

¹³ For further details on the Nigerian Civil War, see U. Faruk, *The Victors and Vanquished of the Nigerian Civil War...*

¹⁴ Immediately after the Civil War, the then Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon declared that “there is no victor, no vanquished”. Immediately, he followed with reconstruction which was aimed at rebuilding all that the Civil War had destroyed, including peace and unity in the country. See

¹⁵ For details on what the Second National Development Plan entails, see O. E. Anthony, *Political Economy of Nigeria...*, pp. 141-144.

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¹⁷ A. I. Yandaki, “Paralysis and Decay: A Historical Analysis on the Genesis of Corruption in the Nigerian Polity”, July 1992, p. 5.



lifestyles.¹⁸ This was no different for Nigerian leadership from the 1970s onward. Arguably, the roots of the nation's escalating corruption, which first became pervasive among leaders before spreading throughout society, can be traced back to the later years of Gowon's administration. Consequently, the Second National Development Plan came and went without delivering any tangible benefits to the average Nigerian. Instead, it brought inflation and widespread economic hardship, exacerbated by the Udoji Award and the austerity measures introduced during Olusegun Obasanjo's military regime.¹⁹ These developments starkly revealed a leadership lacking in vision, direction, and genuine concern for Nigeria's future – let alone any meaningful reflection on the past.

The evident mismanagement of public offices under Gowon's administration likely prompted Murtala Mohammed to establish the Assets Investigation Panel upon seizing power through a military coup in July 1975. The main objectives of the investigation panel were among others, "to investigate the overseas assets of all the governors and federal commissioners, investigate the domestic assets of their associates and of 'certain individuals who grew rich overnight', and to carry further investigations into the assets of some senior service or retired officers of the government not included among those already investigated."²⁰ In addition, the Third National Development Plan was launched with an initial investment of over ₦30 billion, later rising to ₦43.3 billion – ten times the budget of the Second National Development Plan and approximately fifteen times that of the first.²¹ These measures sparked renewed optimism for national reform and development. However, this sense of hope was short-lived, as Murtala Mohammed was assassinated in February 1976, less than a year after assuming office, leading to a retreat from his ambitious vision for change.

Bound by the relentless march of time, even Obasanjo's military regime could not prevent the Nigerian economy from heading toward disaster. This decline was largely driven by the oil glut of the late 1970s, which laid bare the lack of long-term economic planning and the rampant looting by the ruling elite – both of which came at the expense of national development. By 1978, the economic downturn had led to a 6.7 percent drop in Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).²² When Alhaji Shehu Shagari's civilian government took power in 1979, the economy was already in dire straits and continued to deteriorate, exacerbated by the administration's reckless spending and deepening mismanagement. Ultimately, the government found itself with no choice but to begin preparations for securing a three-year, \$2.5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as a temporary measure. Before it could secure the funds, Shagari's government was overthrown in yet another coup.²³

Although Shagari's government could point to some achievements – such as the introduction of the Fourth National Development Plan (1981–1985), the first civilian-prepared plan since 1966; the initiation of Abuja as the new capital; the establishment of several universities across the country; and the promotion of the "one nation, one destiny" slogan to emphasize national

¹⁸ Ibn Khaldun quoted, *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Y. B. Usman, *Corruption in Nigeria: Selected Writings of Yusuf Bala Usman*, Centre for Democratic Development Research and Training, 2008, p. 120.

²¹ O. E. Anthony, *Political Economy of Nigeria...*, p. 144.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²³ *Ibid.*



unity – the damage caused by the administration was immense.²⁴ In what seemed like an effort to rescue the country from the crises created by its leadership, Buhari's military regime emerged in 1983 through a coup. In addition to pursuing an aggressive internal development policy, Buhari's government deserves recognition for its attempts to reform the nation's deteriorating moral and political climate, most notably through its War Against Indiscipline (WAI) and its crackdown on corruption.²⁵

Taking control of Nigeria's trajectory through time, the transition from Buhari to Babangida in 1985 – yet another military coup – was akin to replacing a myopic driver with a blind one. Babangida's regime could be described as one of *Paradoxical Development*, or what the Hausa aptly call *ci gaban mai gina rijiya* (akin to digging a well, in which deepening down counts as progress). While it could claim some achievements, such as infrastructural expansion and the final relocation of the capital from Lagos to Abuja, its policies ultimately inflicted long-term harm on the nation's future.²⁶ Most notably, the regime ushered in neo-colonial economic entrapment under the guise of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), which introduced exploitative economic conditions that weakened national sovereignty. Ironically, SAP was once viewed by a Nigerian Head of State as a development strategy, despite its devastating consequences.²⁷ This decision was made with little regard for the lessons of the past or genuine concern for the nation's future – seemingly serving only the interests of the ruling elite. It is no surprise, then, that since the mid-1980s devaluation of the naira, Nigeria's currency has suffered continuous depreciation on the international stage.

The 1980s could be regarded as a decade in which Nigeria's ruling class committed some of its most disastrous mistakes, including the abandonment of Historical studies, the discipline that help us “understand (better) what we have done, the reason of our being, why we are as we are, and what made us understand, conceive our being and becoming.”²⁸ The removal of history from the school curriculum symbolized a broader disregard for critical reflection and national identity. Meanwhile, the quality of education, particularly in public schools, suffered immensely under the weight of corruption. As resources were mismanaged and priorities misplaced, the once-robust educational system continued to deteriorate, leading to a steady decline in standards and accessibility.²⁹

Throughout the later years of Babangida's regime and the subsequent military rule under Abacha in the 1990s, the military clung to power despite widespread opposition, including major events such as the annulment of the June 12 election, the assassination of Dele Giwa, and the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa. Against all odds, they not only maintained control but

²⁴ A. I. Yandaki, “Nigeria's National Interest as the Basis of Her Internal Growth, Foreign Policy and International Relations”, Being a brief submission to the Committee on Foreign Policy – (National Technical Working Groups of the Vision 20:2020), 20th, 05, 2009, p. 2.

²⁵ J. Paden,

²⁶ See G. E. Umoden, *Ibid*.

²⁷ A. I. Yandaki, “The Vision 2010 and the Challenge of Development in 21st Century Nigeria: A Future in Which Past?”, Being a Text of Paper Presented at the 44th Congress of the Historical Society of Nigeria, on “History, Democracy and the Challenges of the 21st Century, University of Abuja, 21st-24th November, 1999, p. 7.

²⁸ J. O. Y. Gasset, “History as a System” in H. Meyerhoff (ed.), *The Philosophy of History in Our Time: An Anthology*, New York, Anchor Books, 1959, p. 59.

²⁹ See A. Samaila and Y. Abubakar, “Refusing to forget: Reflections on the Neglect of History Education and the Challenges of Nation Building in Nigeria”, Being a Paper Presented at the 62nd Annual Conference of the Historical Society of Nigeria, on the theme “Institutions and Nation Building in Nigeria since Independence, from 5th-6th June, 2017, Sokoto State University, Sokoto.



even crafted an ideology to justify their prolonged rule – “the ideology of transition”. This is because Babangida in particular spent over five years in the name of transition. “A Transition to what? In a case where even an elected president has only four years to be in office?”³⁰ Despite this political entrenchment, Abacha launched yet another development initiative in 1996 – Vision 2010 – a long-term plan aimed at addressing Nigeria’s developmental challenges and setting the country on a path toward significant progress by 2010.³¹ However, this period was marked by rampant corruption. By 1999, *The Week* magazine reported that the Abacha family had illicitly amassed ₦65 billion from Nigeria’s coffers. Later that year, Abdulsalami Abubakar’s military government announced the confiscation of vast sums from Abacha’s family in multiple hard currencies.³² Even more staggering, Nuhu Ribadu, the first chairman of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), estimated that Abacha had stolen approximately \$6 billion, of which only half was recovered over the next 15 years after an arduous and costly legal pursuit. As for Vision 2010, the plan quickly lost momentum and was effectively abandoned with the return of civilian rule under Obasanjo in 1999.³³

Rather than inspiring hope in Nigerians about the future of their country, the 21st century and its accompanying pseudo-democracy ushered in even more troubling leadership. While Olusegun Obasanjo made significant efforts to stabilize democracy and steer Nigeria away from the grip of military dictatorship, his economic policies took a different turn. His administration prioritized negotiating with Western financial institutions and investors to reduce Nigeria’s debt burden, a move that ultimately succeeded in lowering the country’s debt.³⁴ However, this approach came at a cost. The continued dependence on Western nations created an avenue for the ongoing exploitation of Nigeria’s vast resources, often at the expense of genuine national development. Rather than fostering self-sufficiency and long-term economic growth, these policies reinforced external control over Nigeria’s economic future.

The fight against corruption initially showed promise with the establishment of the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) in 2000 and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in 2003, partly as an effort to improve Nigeria’s global image. However, this momentum was soon undermined by Obasanjo’s inability – or perhaps unwillingness – to address corruption and injustice within his inner circle. As a result, the anti-corruption campaign quickly lost its direction. The transition to a more open political space also unleashed deep-seated social tensions and violence, the inevitable fallout of decades of systemic corruption and injustice among the ruling elite. Over time, the EFCC itself became little more than a tool for political manipulation, selectively wielded by those in power to target opponents rather than serving as a genuine instrument of accountability.³⁵

With the passage of time, Obasanjo’s government gave way to that of Umaru Musa Yar’Adua in 2007. Despite appearing visionary with its *Seven-Point Agenda*, the Niger Delta Amnesty Program, the banking sector reforms spearheaded by Sanusi Lamido Sanusi following the

³⁰ A. I. Yandaki, *Towards an Understanding the Root Causes of Ethno-Religious Violence in Contemporary Nigeria and the Way Forward*, Being a Text of Paper Presented at the 23rd National Conference of NATAIS on Global Terrorism and Islamic/Arabic Scholarship held at City Campus, UDUS, Sokoto, 30th August to 4th September 2004, p. 8.

³¹ See A. I. Yandaki, “The Vision 2010 and the Challenge of Development in 21st Century...”

³² Akin Obasa, “A Deluge of Problems”, *The week*, April 5, 1999, p. 9.

³³ R. Bourne, *Nigeria: A New History of a Turbulent Century*, London, Zed Books Ltd, 2015, p. 207.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 206.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 207.



global financial crisis, and the ambitious Vision 20:2020 blueprint – which aspired for Nigeria to rank among the world's top 20 economies by 2020 – the Yar'Adua administration soon lost its momentum as the president's health deteriorated.³⁶ Frequent medical trips abroad left the government in a state of paralysis, where self-interest prevailed over national governance. A power struggle ensued between Yar'Adua's family, led by First Lady Turai Yar'Adua and her northern allies, and supporters of Vice President Goodluck Jonathan, who pushed for him to be declared acting president.³⁷ The impasse ended with Yar'Adua's death in May 2010, paving the way for Jonathan's succession. Under Jonathan's leadership, Nigerian governance reached new depths of dysfunction. With an administration that downplayed corruption – epitomized by the infamous remark that “stealing is not corruption” – the country saw an unprecedented surge in injustice and a total lack of direction.³⁸ Concern for both the past and the future was all but abandoned, as corruption and mismanagement defined the era.

To be brief and direct, Nigerian leadership – across federal, state, and local governments – has been in steady decline since the early 1970s. With only a few exceptions, where some leaders sought meaningful change but were hindered by various obstacles, governance has progressively worsened – moving from bad to very bad and ultimately to its lowest point. Over the years, corruption and injustice have become deeply ingrained in Nigerian society. To borrow the words of Alkali, “if prizes went to those who often proclaim one thing and do the opposite”,³⁹ Nigerian leaders would take home gold medals. This pattern is not limited to political figures but extends to leaders in government institutions, traditional authorities, and the civil service. Corruption and injustice are pervasive across nearly every sector, posing a significant barrier to Nigeria's development. Even in the second decade of the 21st century, under the recycled leadership of Buhari (2015-2023) – who casted himself as a crusader against corruption – the problem remained deeply entrenched, proving that rhetoric alone was insufficient to bring about genuine change.

The Problem of National Interest in Nigeria's Nation Building

The previous section of this paper highlights the root cause of Nigeria's nation-building challenges: bad leadership. This leadership failure is marked by a profound lack of understanding of the country's past and an absence of genuine concern for its future. Bad leadership stands at the core of Nigeria's nation-building crisis because it has led to a complete loss of direction. As a result, this lack of direction has been driven by an absence of true national interest, which, in turn, has been the primary factor behind many of Nigeria's enduring problems. Without a leadership committed to national development and historical awareness, the country continues to grapple with instability, corruption, and socio-political fragmentation. National interest, itself,

³⁶ See *Ibid*, pp. 225-227.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 225.

³⁸ N. H. Alkali, *When Stealing is not Corruption: Nigeria Under President Jonathan*, Adamawa, Ando Dembo Publishing Company, 2015, p. 4.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 31.



...means a rallying point where all the citizens could meet on the common ground of patriotism and national consciousness, and for which they can sacrifice even their lives in case the need arises.⁴⁰

It simply refers to what a nation believes in. “It is supposed to reflect a collective conscience of a sort which conjures so much meanings at the mention of even the name of a country.”⁴¹ A crucial question to ask at this point is: What immediate thoughts come to mind when people hear the name *Nigeria*? Undoubtedly, corruption, lack of direction, and weak leadership are among the foremost. But what exactly went wrong for Nigeria to be perceived this way by both its own citizens and the outside world? Does this imply that the various developmental strategies and blueprints implemented by successive governments, as outlined in the previous section, were poorly conceived? Or is it that Nigeria, as a nation, has never truly defined its national interest? The answer to these questions is *no*. The issue is not the absence of plans or strategies but rather the persistent failure of leadership to effectively implement them with genuine commitment to national interest and progress.

Indeed, successive governments have introduced numerous plans and developmental strategies. From the *First National Development Plan* to *Vision 20:2020*, most of Nigeria’s development blueprints have been theoretically sound. Even sector-specific initiatives, such as the *National Accelerated Food Production Programme* (1973), *Operation Feed the Nation* (1975), and the ongoing *River Basin Development Authorities* (1976–present), were well-conceived in principle. On a broader and long-term scale, Nigeria has also seen multiple constitutions – drafted in 1963, 1979, 1989, 1995, and 1999 – each upholding constitutional supremacy and designed to serve as frameworks for national interest. At their core, these constitutions have aimed to promote security, welfare, and good governance, with the ultimate goal of ensuring national unity and progress. However, the recurring challenge has been the failure to translate these well-intended policies and legal frameworks into effective action, largely due to poor leadership and systemic corruption.

In fact, the 1999 constitution, more than any other constitution projected what should supposedly be Nigerian national interest under chapter II titled “Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy”.⁴² This chapter underscores the fundamental obligation of all branches of government to uphold and implement the provisions of the constitution. The nation is to be governed based on the principles of democracy and social justice, with the security and welfare of the people as the government’s primary responsibility. In line with this, a policy of balanced national growth is to be pursued, ensuring inclusivity regardless of ethnicity, gender, or religion, with the overarching goal of fostering patriotism, peace, and unity. Additionally, all forms of corruption and abuse of power are to be eradicated, as stipulated in the constitution. Economic development is to be actively promoted for the benefit of all citizens. The constitution also establishes that social order should be built on the ideals of freedom, equality, and justice. Government policies must aim to provide equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels, including free, compulsory, and universal primary education, as well as, where feasible, free university education and adult literacy programs.

⁴⁰ A. I. Yandaki, “The Changing Nature of Nigerian History, 19th Century to the Present”, in S. B. Ahmad and I. K. Abdussalam (eds.), *Resurgent Nigeria...*, p. 48.

⁴¹ A. I. Yandaki, “Nigeria’s National Interest...”, p. 1.

⁴² O. Olakanmi, *The Nigerian Constitutions, 1963, 1979, 1999: A Compendium*, Second Edition, Abuja, Panaf House, 2006, pp. 327-332.



The protection and improvement of the environment is likewise enshrined as a national priority. Furthermore, the nation's ethical foundation is to be built on discipline, integrity, dignity of labor, social justice, religious tolerance, self-reliance, and patriotism. Nigerian cultural values are to be preserved, and it is the duty of every citizen to be law-abiding and to contribute positively to the nation's development in any way possible.⁴³

All these theoretical postulations represent an excellent framework for collective national development, outlining a well-formulated national interest. However, what about the practical reality? The answer lies in the previous section: these very principles were first violated by their own formulators – the leaders – driven by selfishness and greed. As a result, both the development plans and constitutional provisions meant to guide Nigeria's progress have largely failed in practice. As observed above, public officeholders in Nigeria, for decades, have prioritized safeguarding their personal luxuries, securing their careers, and ensuring the advancement of their children, close associates, and relatives. It is not that they are unaware of the importance of reflecting on the past, planning for a better future, and working toward achieving well-conceived goals. Rather, their focus has been on crafting and aggressively pursuing plans – not for societal progress, but for the strategic circulation of power among themselves and their close allies. This continuous grip on state power serves as a guaranteed means of wealth accumulation, regardless of its consequences for the broader population. Moreover, this pursuit of power comes at the direct expense of collective societal development in every conceivable area, including infrastructure, education, and economic growth. Instead of prioritizing national progress, leadership has become a mechanism for sustaining elite control, leaving the country in a cycle of stagnation and missed opportunities.⁴⁴

Bad leadership in Nigeria has had far-reaching negative consequences, stalling both national progress and the collective development of its people. Despite Nigeria's vast wealth and abundant resources, the economy remains severely underdeveloped due to decades of systemic looting and mismanagement. One of the most devastating impacts of this leadership failure is the widespread lack of access to quality education. A significant portion of the country's ever-growing population has either been denied proper educational training and facilities or has no access to them at all, contributing to a largely illiterate society. This failure in education further weakens national development, as an undereducated population struggles to compete in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy. In terms of employment and economic opportunity, Nigeria has also fallen short of its constitutional promise that "the state shall direct its policy towards ensuring that all citizens, without discrimination of any group whatsoever, have the opportunity to secure adequate means of livelihood as well as suitable employment."⁴⁵ Instead, the reality is quite the opposite. A growing pool of university graduates – many of whom receive substandard education – find themselves unable to secure employment, while millions of others, especially those without formal education, are left to fend for themselves. Government jobs, where they do exist, are often distributed based on nepotism rather than merit, further eroding the effectiveness of public institutions. This entrenched favoritism has led to the continued decline of Nigeria's civil service across local, state, and federal levels, reinforcing inefficiency and deepening public distrust in governance. Ultimately, bad leadership has not only failed to build a functioning state but has also created systemic

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ See A. I. Yandaki, "Paralysis and Decay..."

⁴⁵ O. Olakanmi, *The Nigerian Constitutions...* p. 330.



inequalities that hinder national growth and social cohesion. Think of any institution in Nigeria today, it is the same story corruption and injustice.

In a nation where there is no collective national interest or sense of belonging – where even leaders prioritize their personal interests at the expense of the constitutionally enshrined national interest – citizens are left to fend for themselves. In a predominantly illiterate, individualistic, and corrupt society, survival becomes a personal struggle rather than a collective effort. When people focus solely on their own success, who will advocate for them? The answer is clear: only themselves. As a result, life in Nigeria has increasingly aligned with the *jungle rule* – the survival of the fittest. University lecturers work tirelessly to secure their livelihoods and careers, just as lawyers, street hawkers, and food vendors do the same in their respective fields. However, while some individuals pursue lawful means of survival – albeit often with a level of indiscipline and corruption – others resort to more destructive paths. This has fueled the rise of religious extremism, ethnic tensions, and violent crime, exacerbating Nigeria's already fragile state. The consequences are evident in the emergence of groups such as Niger Delta militants, Boko Haram, armed robbers, bandits, and kidnappers in the North-West, among others. As Yandaki aptly observed, if there is anything in Nigeria that truly qualifies as *national*, it is the *national cake* – the wealth and resources of the state.⁴⁶ When it comes to dividing the national cake, those in power set aside ethnic and religious differences to serve their common interests. This reality underscores the fact that Nigeria's core challenges are not rooted in religion or ethnicity but in corruption and injustice, driven by greed and selfishness.

Discussing about the trouble with Nigeria, Nigerian literary writer Chinua Achebe, categorically stated that “The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character.” He went ahead to defend his assertion by citing an example. He stated that “On the morning after Murtala Muhammed seized power in July 1975, public servants in Lagos were found ‘on seat’ at seven-thirty in the morning. Even the ‘go slow’ traffic that had defeated every solution and defied every regime vanished overnight from the streets! Why? The new ruler's reputation for ruthlessness was sufficient to transform in the course of only one night the style and habit of Nigeria's unruly capital.”⁴⁷ While this may be true of the time when the book was published (i.e. early 1980s), it is entirely a different case today.

The *Nigerian character* has now become a major obstacle to national development. Many Nigerian citizens, along with non-citizens who have entered the country illegally – especially through land borders – contribute daily to the country's problems in various ways. Even when a leader genuinely intends to bring about positive change, the entrenched culture of corruption, indiscipline, and self-interest often ensures that such efforts are sabotaged. However, at the root of this dysfunction lies the persistent failure of leadership. A telling example of this leadership failure can be seen in a video released by *Jakadiya Radio and Television* on Facebook, documenting a reconciliation effort between the Katsina State government and certain Fulani groups believed to be involved in armed banditry and kidnapping. In the video, a Fulani spokesman lamented that their actions were largely driven by systemic injustice. He argued that the average Fulani man living in remote rural areas or the bush has little to no understanding of democracy or governance, as they have been historically neglected – deprived

⁴⁶ A. I. Yandaki, “Nigeria's National Interest...,”

⁴⁷ C. Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, England, Heinemann, 1983, p. 1.



of education, security, and essential social services. This government failure, he claimed, has fueled resentment and contributed to the rise of criminal activities among marginalized groups. This situation highlights a broader truth: while the failures of the Nigerian people contribute to the nation's struggles, the root cause remains bad governance. Decades of neglect, corruption, and exclusionary policies have created conditions where crime, lawlessness, and societal dysfunction thrive, making national development an increasingly difficult goal to achieve.⁴⁸

In summary, only a small fraction of individuals – who lack the power to alter the state of affairs – genuinely care about Nigeria's collective future. Even fewer reflect on the nation's past, which is essential for understanding the root causes of its problems and devising effective solutions. A striking example of this lack of foresight is the general indifference among both Nigerian citizens and government officials toward the country's rapid population growth and its long-term consequences. Despite the alarming rate of population increase, serious government attention to the issue only emerged in October 2018, and even then, no decisive action was taken. On the part of the general population, many remain unaware of the implications of this demographic surge. Since 1960, Nigeria's population has nearly tripled, rising from 45.1 million to over 200 million in 2018. With an annual growth rate of approximately 3.2 percent, Nigeria is projected to become one of the four most populous countries in the world by 2050, with an estimated population exceeding 289 million. Without proactive planning and policy interventions, this population explosion will further strain the country's already overstretched resources, deepening existing socio-economic and developmental challenges.⁴⁹ Of course, population explosion in itself is not a problem – as long as the population is productive. However, the critical question that must be asked is: Is Nigeria's population, a substantial portion of which is illiterate, truly productive? The simple answer is no. The only way to transform this growing population into a productive force is through investment in education, as already mandated by the Nigerian constitution. In a country where voluntary compliance with the rule of law is weak, providing quality education remains the most effective way to minimize socio-economic challenges and develop human resources. An educated population is better equipped to contribute meaningfully to national development, innovate solutions to societal problems, and drive economic progress. Without a strong commitment to education, Nigeria's demographic growth will continue to be a liability rather than an asset.

Toward the Future

As observed above, in Nigeria's inevitable journey from the past through the present to the future, the nation lacks a clear direction – let alone a defined destination. Without a genuine roadmap or a vigorously pursued national development plan, Nigeria remains adrift. After all, in any unavoidable journey, if one does not know where they are going, no road will lead them there. In this regard, Yandaki once remarked that “with the kind of background Nigeria has had, and if past experiences and processes are what gave birth to the present processes, then it is as good as saying Nigeria has no future.” However, he cautioned against absolute pessimism, emphasizing that “man is a ‘hoping animal,’ and the future is an open arena for human action

⁴⁸ The video can be watched through this link (https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=522806855199129&id=423277235111361), accessed 21-09-2019.

⁴⁹ I. Mudashir *et. al.*, “Nigeria Worries Over Population Explosion”, *Daily Trust*, Thursday, October 25, 2018, p. 5.



and improvement.”⁵⁰ That said, development and nation-building cannot be achieved through mere rhetoric or wishful thinking. It is neither effortless nor instantaneous. Rather, it is a difficult, painstaking process that requires relentless commitment and hard work. This reality is evident in history: the systematic exploitation of African resources, economies, and even minds for the benefit of imperialist powers was itself a long-term, meticulously planned, and labor-intensive endeavor. If Nigeria is to chart a new course, it must equally invest in deliberate, strategic, and sustained efforts toward genuine development.⁵¹

To move toward a meaningful future, Nigeria requires a highly committed leadership that prioritizes genuine populist and aggressive development policies. Beyond this, the country must return to its constitution and ensure the dedicated and sincere implementation of key factors that can foster national consciousness among its citizens. A critical step in this direction is making history – a discipline that raises awareness and deepens national identity – compulsory for all students, regardless of their field of study. Fortunately, the government has recently taken steps to reinstate history into the school curriculum. However, historians themselves must go beyond the traditional empiricist approach of data collection as their primary focus. Instead, they should engage with contemporary issues that promote self-employment and self-reliance.⁵² Historical inquiry must not be limited to answering *who?*, *what?*, and *how?* but must critically ask *why?* As a discipline, history must shift from being merely descriptive to actively shaping society. Historical scholarship should not only analyze past events but also contribute to understanding the social capacity for transformation. *History doing* should be pursued *in* and *for* the benefit of society, rather than being confined to an abstract academic exercise. By positioning history as a tool for conscious social change, historians can help equip Nigerians with the knowledge and critical thinking necessary to take charge of their collective future.⁵³

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined Nigeria’s nation-building processes through the lens of the philosophy of history, specifically the *past, present, and future* framework. The objective was to identify the missing link in Nigeria’s nation-building efforts, which lies in the absence of a clearly defined and practically pursued national interest. The study has revealed that bad leadership – along with its associated forces such as corruption, greed, and injustice – has been the primary factor behind this missing link. Over the years, these issues have been exacerbated by a general disregard for both the past and the future, leading to severe consequences for Nigeria’s development. As brilliantly noticed by Temu and Swai, “it is sometimes much more difficult to state a problem correctly than to find a solution to it... and this endeavor is necessary if the promethean task of storming the heavens and so take control of the process of development and deliberate planning of the future is to be accomplished”.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ A. I. Yandaki, “The Vision 2010 and the Challenge of Development in 21st Century...”, pp. 7-8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² A. I. Yandaki, “The Changing Nature of Nigerian History...”, p. 48.

⁵³ B. Swai, “History and the Idea of Development: Explaining the Peripheralization of a Discipline”, Being a Paper Presented at the Congress of the Historical Society of Nigeria, Sokoto, 1991, p. 18.

⁵⁴ A. Temu and B. Swai, *Historians and Africanist History: A Critique*, London, Zed Press, 1981, p. ix.



With the problem now clearly identified, it becomes the responsibility of historians to re-centralize history in social debates and discussions, much like it was during Nigeria's nationalist struggle. As demonstrated in this paper, history is not merely an exercise in admiration of the past; rather, it seeks to explain the past in order to transform it. It is not just a tribute to a once-glorious era or a tool for understanding the present – it is also a means of projecting the past into the future. History serves as the foundation for social action and must be treated as such by historians. It should not be confined to academic discourse but should actively contribute to raising consciousness and shaping both circumstances and individual agency. By engaging with history in this transformative way, historians can play a crucial role in addressing Nigeria's nation-building challenges and fostering a society that is critically aware of its past, present, and future. This entails teaching Nigerians "to appreciate the finer things of life; to glance back over the whole history of mankind and to look forward as far as thought can reach".⁵⁵ Leaders must also, not only be willing to, but change. At this point, it is hoped that the essay has vindicate itself from any skepticism that may arise from the assertion that the philosophy of history also feeds into practical life of human beings and give it essence and coherence.

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