



HISTORY: THE USEFULNESS OF THE USELESS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the relevance of history. It made use of inter-disciplinary methods specifically: historical approach and ethnography. The study is designed to address the significance of history in the following areas: that history provides identity, promotes and encourages good citizenship, serves as a guide to improve society and avoid past mistakes, and history also fosters national cohesion. This paper discovered that some people believed that history is obsolete or irrelevant. Thus this paper revealed that the study of the past will help us to learn from mistakes that were made before us so that we do not repeat them. It can help us to solve problems that we face today by seeing the solutions that were tried in the past. History provides a sense of identity. However, if we believe that studying history is useless, we admit that we are living lives which will become useless in future. Therefore, studying history should be encouraged at all costs.*

KEYWORDS: History, Relevance, Citizenship, Society, Mistake.



INTRODUCTION

People live in the present and yet struggle for the future. One can view the past and achieve the understanding of the past through diligent study of history. The past is understandable to us only in the light of the present and one can fully understand the present only in the light of the past.¹ History is one of the most widely accepted disciplines in arts, humanities and sciences. It is very useful and indispensable. Of course, history provides a storehouse of information about how people and societies behave. It gives an extensive evidential base for the contemplation and analysis of how societies function. History allows one to test his or her own moral sense and enhance it against some of the real complexities individuals have faced in difficult settings.

By studying history one can comprehend the factors that cause change and elements of an institution. Auguste Comte was of the opinion that history provided the raw materials for the understanding of society.² Bury argued that history was concerned with the constant interaction and reciprocity among all the various manifestations of human brain power and human emotion. Bury's argument shows that history exposes human feelings and moral values. For instance, under President Muhammadu Buhari led administration in Nigeria in 2016, some people from Igbo extraction were demanding for restructuring in order to avoid a repeat of Igbo pogrom of 1966.

Without knowledge of history, man and society would run adrift, rudderless craft on the uncharted sea of time. The importance of history to man and his environment cannot be overemphasized. This is because the ripples of the past are always affecting the present. In other words, the present is inseparable from the past since it is the continuation of the past. For instance, when you visit a medical doctor he or she will ask you about your medical history to enable correct diagnosis. Some of these forms are very detailed asking questions that require information from rarely accessed memory banks. The doctor asks these questions to enable him to have the medical history of every patient. Doctors understand very clearly that the past matters. In fact, Peter N. Stearns was right when he asserted, "People live in the present, they plan for and worry about the future."³ This implies that without history one can be led astray. History provides reliable information about how people and societies behave. How can we evaluate war if the nation is at peace, unless we use historical materials? History helps us understand change and how the society we live in came to be. The past causes the present and so the future. Only through studying history can we grasp how things change and to comprehend the factors that cause change; therefore, to jettison history is like erasing the memory of a teacher and expect him to continue practicing his profession. This paper is designed to address the importance of history in the following areas: history provides identity, history promotes and encourages good citizenship, serves as a guide to improve society and avoid mistakes, and its ability to foster national cohesion.

History Provides Identity

Historical data include evidence about how families, groups, institutions and whole countries were formed and how they evolved. For example, History has it that Imenyi of Uzuakoli in Bende L.G.A in Abia state Nigeria belonged to a large family which experienced difficulties. When he could not ultimately stand more of the fighting and quarreling which were so perpetual in his home, he fled by night with most of his belongings to a new home where he settled peacefully. He called his new home after his first son, Akoli. Like his father, Akoli had



many children, one of whom was Ozu. Ozu in turn gave birth to five sons namely; Oma, Ngwu, Mbah, Nkwo and Ozu. It is from these five children that the five villages which make up Uzuakoli have developed: Eluoma (Oma), Ngwu, Amamba (Mba), Amankwo (Nkwo) and Agbaozu (Ozu). The five villages united to form Uzuakoli, a compound of the names of their father, Ozu and their grandfather Akoli.⁴ The work of history has made it possible for people of Uzuakoli to have some knowledge and information about their place of origin. This is applicable to other villages, communities, clans and countries. Another example is that of Ngwa history and the Ohuhu's The Ngwas, the main body of the Ngwa clan is said to have originated from a village called Umunoha in the present Owerri zone of Imo State Nigeria. Tradition related that people of Umunoha village had taken a journey in search of new lands in which to dwell, the journey lasted many days and the group finally arrived at the banks of the great Imo-River. Tired, coupled with the fact that Imo river had overflowed to recede, and to find food to eat. The only handy food item then was yam. One group felt it would be quicker to roast the yams, while the other group preferred boiling the yams. As soon as they were occupied cooking the food, the stream began to rise.

Three of the traveling brothers who boiled their yams, hurriedly ate the food, packed up their belongings and crossed over to the other side of the river, leaving their kit and kin behind who had adopted the process of roasting their yam. The three people who gained the left bank of the river were Ukwu, Nwoha and Avosi in order of age. They were given the name 'Ngwa' on account of the expeditious manner of their crossing, while the stragglers on the right bank were named 'Ohuhu'. Till this day, all towns and villages on the other side of Imo-River are referred to as 'Ndi-Ohuhu' or 'Umu-Ohuhu'⁵

History Promotes and Encourages Good Citizenship

Scholars suggested that history should be compulsory in schools because historical facts helped to distinguish the educated from uneducated. History helps pupils or students to understand and respect common humanity and diversity. The skills, concepts and processes involved in learning history can help develop principled, thoughtful and confident citizens. Learning history can help children to develop a critical attitude to opinion. It also helps to revive their cultural traits and how to be patriotic. For example, the Nigerian government through the National University Commission introduced "Nigerian peoples and culture" into the Nigerian University curriculum for every Nigerian graduate to have basic knowledge of Nigerian history⁶.

It Serves as a Guide to Improve Society and Minimize Mistakes

The consequences of the past lives with us, therefore, it is unrealistic to say that the past in the real sense is dead. Whether it be wars, atrocities committed in the past, it is essential to study its causes, effects, losses or gains among others. The knowledge acquired enables us to improve both the present and the future, as we work hard to avoid the mistakes and misdeeds of similar kinds. Those who do not have correct information about history are destined to repeat its mistakes. For example, the profound effects of World War I gave rise to the formation of the League of Nations in 1919 but when the League of Nations failed to maintain global peace and unity, the United Nations Organization emerged in 1945 to promote global peace and prevent war. This view is attested to by these words found in the preamble of the United Nations charter, it reads "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind⁷. Moreover, the framers of the American



constitution were properly guided by the memory of the huge religious conflict in the seventeenth century in Europe, the thirty (1618-1648) years war which was one of the longest, most destructive conflicts in European history⁸.

The knowledge of history enables us to understand the working of human society and formation of the initiative bonds of relationship and dependence, know the origin of some social evils and provides experience to solve present challenges. The former President of Nigeria, President Olusegun Obasanjo advised the members of IPOB and MASSOB group to learn from the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970 before making any agitations⁹. The Nigerian civil war was one of the most destructive conflicts in Africa. It brought untold hardship on entire Nigerians especially people from Igbo extraction and estimates of the number of people who died during the Nigerian Civil War vary significantly, from 500,000 to 3,000,000. Causes included battlefield deaths, ethnic cleansing, and starvation¹⁰.

The Nigerian civil war guided the framers of the Nigerian 1999 constitution to ensure that the terrible mistake that led to such war would not be repeated. The preamble of that constitution stated, "Nigeria is one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign state to be known by the name of the Federal Republic of Nigeria"¹¹. This statement means that anyone or group of persons who want Nigeria to be divided is against the constitution and can be called a rebel.

It Has the Ability to foster National Cohesion

Nationalism is itself a product of history. The Nigerian experience is very pertinent in describing what ignorance of history can cause a nation. Some people erroneously argued that the people of Nigeria have no historical relations and that the amalgamation of 1914 is a political accident in the sense that the British forcefully brought together people that have no form of either cultural or historical affinity together and that Nigeria is a mere geographical expression. See Ahmadu Bello, "My Life" he described Nigeria as a "Mistake of 1914"¹² for example, in 1945 a famous Igbo lawyer and parliamentarian in Lagos said that Igbo denomination of Nigeria was a matter of time. Around 1947, Chief Obafemi Awolowo referred to Nigeria as a mere geographical expression. While in 1948, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa reiterated Awolowo's view, he said "many Nigeria's deceive themselves by thinking that Nigeria is one...this is wrong."¹³ Similarly, Richard asserted:

When the North formed a political party, the Northern leaders called it Northern people's congress (NPC). They didn't call it Nigeria's people congress. That was in accordance with the dictum and policies of Lugard¹⁴

He argued that the British system of government was imposed on Nigerians and such a system is the type practiced in Britain. According to him, in the British structure England has a permanent majority in the House of Commons. There is no way Wales can ever dominate England, nor can Scotland dominate Britain. That was what Lugard created in Nigeria, a permanent majority for the North. The population figure is also a fraud. In fact, a British colonial civil servant who was involved in the fraud was trying to expose it but he was never allowed to publish it.

However to dig on the erroneous historical issues would attract lack of national cohesion, engender disunity, chaos and anarchy. History is important and to justify this assertion, ancient cultures devoted much time and effort to teach their children family history. It was thought that the past helps a child understand who he is. Presently, we live in a time of rapid change, a time



of progress; and if we listen to what history has to say, we can come to a sound understanding of the past that will tell us much about the problems we now face. Conversely, if we refuse to listen to history, we will find ourselves fabricating a past that reinforces our understanding of current problems. History teaches values.¹⁵ History explains the present and molds the future. The study of history enhances life because it conjures in the mind a vivid context. Tawney opined:

Historians give an appearance of inevitableness to an existing order by dragging into prominence the forces which they have triumphed and trusted into the background of those which they have swallowed up”.¹⁶

A historian must not represent the victory as a walk over if it was touch-and-go. Sometimes those who were defeated have made as great a contribution to the ultimate result as the victors. These are familiar maxims to every historian. But by and large, the historian is concerned with those who, whether victorious or defeated, achieved something. Hegel observed that:

“In history only those peoples can come under our notice which form a state, has been justly criticized as attaching an exclusive value to one form of social organization and paving the way for an obnoxious state-worship.”¹⁷

Bernard was not far from the truth when he argued:

We are historically minded too, in that our thoughts and feelings are bonds to past generations. A consciousness of a common past and common tradition is the most basic thing that knits together members of any group be it a family, a nation, a church or some others.¹⁸

When the past is ignored, it breeds a generational chaos. The knowledge of history is the precondition of political intelligence. Without history, a society shares no common memory of where it has been, what its core values are, or what decisions of the past account for present circumstances. Without history we cannot undertake any sensible inquiry into the political, social or moral issues in society. Thomas Jefferson long ago prescribed history for all who would take part in self-government because it would enable them to prepare for things yet to come. The philosopher Etienne Gilson noted that: “History is the only laboratory one can use to test the consequences of thought”.¹⁹ History opens to students the great record of human experience, revealing the vast range of accommodations individuals and societies have made to the problems confronting them, and disclosing the consequences that have followed and the various choices that have been made. By studying the choices and decisions of the past students can confront today’s problem and choices with a deeper awareness of the alternative before them and the likely consequences of each. History is important to us because it is the heritage that shaped world history in the future. It is mainly important because it helps us to understand the world and how it became what we see today. It can help us to solve problems that humans face today by seeing the solutions that were tried in the past. History is important because human behavior tends to follow relatively predictable patterns over long periods of time.

For example, Leonidas is important to Greek history because he symbolizes the bravery and courage of the whole Greece. His decision to stay and fight with his 300 soldiers against the thousands of soldiers of Persia made him an important figure in Greek history. History provided ideas on how to help a collapsed economy through the Great Depression. History provides information on how superior countries defeated weak ones. With this knowledge, we can cite the relevant information we need to highlight the problem, better express why it is a harmful



issue that needs addressing, and try new things that have not been done before to combat it. If educational system do not provide a systematic foundation in the study of history, then people will glean some picture of the past and ignore the lessons expected of them from very significant associations (which include everything from nations and religious groups to local clubs and neighborhood network), from a medley of other resources – from cultural traditions, from collective memories, from myths, rumors, songs, sagas, from their families, their friends and from every form of human communication from gossip to the printing press and on to the websites.

People do learn, in other words, from a variety of resources that are assimilated both consciously and unconsciously. But what is learned may be patchy or confused, leaving some feeling rootless; or it may be simplified and partisan, leaving others feeling embattled or embittered. A good educational system should help people to study history more formally, more systematically, more accurately, more critically and more longitudinally. By that means, people will have access to a great human resource gathered over many generations, which is the collective set of studies of the past and the human story within that.

CONCLUSION

History provides detailed knowledge of our religion, cultural institutions, administration and comprehends the present day problems nationally and internationally. It adopts all forms of evidence to examine, interpret and revisit the past. They included the following: oral communication, written documents and objects like: buildings, artifacts, photographs and paintings. History is a study of man with innumerable biographies. It gives a fascinating story of how man has developed through the ages. History is a science which pursues its own techniques to interpret facts. Just like other natural and physical sciences like physics and chemistry, history uses methods of energy like observation, classification, experiment and formulation of hypotheses and analysis. Therefore, studying history should be encouraged at all costs.

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