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*Original Paper*

## The Relevance of History in Contemporary African Societies

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### **Abstract**

This paper examined the relevance and importance of History to the Society. The paper reevaluated the role of history in the society. The research also studied the sources, as well as the nature of history.

The study relied heavily on documentary data and lightly on oral data. The oral data were based on newspapers. The documentary data were subjected to textual and contextual analysis.

The researcher found out that history is core to development of societies.

**Keywords:** Relevance, Education, History, Governance

### **Introduction**

Many historians envisage history as largely journalistic, social cum physical science and in some instances in the modern era, economics or a study of societies rather than of man. Implicitly in the study of history is the belief that man shares a common heritage correlating with each other to the extent that historians in the twenty first century presumes that he can presage through his historical interpretation and knowledge some elucidations for the behavior of the human characters several thousand years ago in different societies and environments and at the same time that man is nevertheless so unique that in the final analysis no two men are the same: there are really no completely identical twins, and each people, each culture, has an integrity of its own to which standards derived from other cultures and the history of other peoples are really irrelevant.

The encumbrance here for the researcher is not to be somnolent of cultures and civilizations that are anxious to impose on others, their own values and standards evolved from their own experience and for their convenience as universal values and standards (Ajayi, 1977). This is what the European 'Masters' connotes as colonization. This is particular to Africa and its quick acceptance of concepts such as democracy and socio- capitalist tendencies. Viewed in this way, it is hoped that man should reflect on the problems of the History in Africa in the attempt to balance the universal nature of man with its unique characteristics. Africa, majorly Nigeria must learn to assert its uniqueness in culture, administration, religion in their governmental policies. Nigeria, for instance do not need to be reticent rejecting some of this globalised concepts having no barring with Nigeria's peculiar cultures. Although, a nation like Nigeria needs to equally assert, its own version or contribution to the common legacy. Another aspect has to do with infrastructures and this comes down to the colonial period. The colonial impact on infrastructure must be seen to be exploitative (Infrastructural Development in Nigeria, 2020). In terms of Migration in and out, history is an important subject to shape and reshape the ethical development of Nigerians. Since independence the colonial pattern of labor migration continue, with Ghana, Ivory Coast and Nigeria continuing to provide seasonal employment in their coffee, cocoa and groundnut plantations for migrants from Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso and Niger, and Senegal's groundnut farms receiving a large number of laborers from Mali (Duyile, William Abiodun, 2021). History is indeed important today. Today, the security situation in Nigeria is tense as the media echoes what groups like Boko Haram was able to do against the Nigerian State (Duyile, Adu, Jegede, & Buhari, 2020). This research therefore suggests that the core, basic to the whole concept of History as a set of academic disciplines correlates with the study of human beings and human nature. This is its relevance that some considers esoteric and misunderstood. History has a course within the humanities remains relevant to the consciousness of Nigerians. It used to be taking for granted that if so many human

beings derive satisfaction from studying literature or history, it must be that they find it important to their existence and that they must find other less obvious justification for such pre-occupations. Some scholars justified the study of the Humanities by claiming that they improved the soul and enabled man to fulfill his religious and human desires better. Other scholars sought justification in claims that the Humanities improve men as men and therefore enable them to better fulfill their obligations to one another (Ade-Ajayi, 1977). Other scholars like Olomola Gabriel conceived of the Humanities as “civilizing” or making man better citizens or “civil” human beings. Others called the Humanities a source of “enlightenment” (Nwachukwu, 2023). Scholars are concerned with relevance in terms of meaning and significance to the lives of the common man, - in terms of a direct relationship between the study of the Humanities and an improvement in the quality of life of the masses (Ogot, 1977). It may also serve as a useful purpose for this research, to examine critically the main concerns of historians over the last few years, and, in particular, how they have tried to justify their pre-occupations. The research would then consider the extent to which the experience of historians is relevant in the wider context of the Humanities. In demanding relevance, particular attention is usually focused on history with its emphasis on the past while relevance points to the present and the future.

### **The Relevance of History**

History is not the past but a study of the past, an attempt to understand and interpret the past for the benefit of the present and also the future. The rich contribution made by pre-colonial Africans to the history of Humanity and the civilization of the Africans. The methodological renewal taking place in the social sciences by the use of historical materialism and structuralism; it is therefore urgent to proceed to a scientific re-writing of African history and to insist on the contributions of the Africans to humanity. The surprise that historians express whenever challenged to demonstrate the relevance of their pre-occupations comes largely from the extent to which they have been concerned – more implicitly than explicitly, but very concerned all the same – with the search for relevance. It needs to be emphasized that history is not the past, but a study of the past. Historians are the first to criticize attempts – futile attempts – to revive the past because they are the first to acknowledge that the past is dead and that it cannot be revived. With all the scientific knowledge at the historians, beck and call, for documenting events and preserving records, historians know that there is no possibility of re-creating or re-inventing the past and they are not interested in recreating that past. Historians also realize that we can only select from the facts available from the past according to what data is available and which of the data available to the historian considers most significant (Ajayi, 1977). It should be understood that historians do not live in the past but interpret it through the facts available to it. The historian seeks facts from the past. He interrogates those events in the past. He tries to live that event. He collects and collates and studies them. But he knows they are only data considered important by the researcher choice from the past. Similarly, the historian is aware that the linguistic situation is ever changing. Languages die and others change beyond recognition. People learn and unlearn languages by the direct will and policies of societies and rulers. In the same way, literatures for all the famed memories of traditional diviners must be seen as ever changing phenomena, which respond to use and contemporary needs or wither and die.

The historian collects data, written, oral, archaeological, linguistic, social or economic data from the past, and selects what he considers most significant for making the past meaningful for the present. He collects the facts to study and not as a substitute to replace or revive a dead past. When the historian studies what is significant, he is concerned with what is most meaningful and important among the data collected about the past, significant in the sense of relevance to the concerns of the present. For the historian, therefore, the search for relevance is a constant pre-occupation because his understanding of what is significant or relevant keeps changing with the dynamics of present technology and methods (Ade-Ajayi, 1977). This can be illustrated with a review of the main concerns of African historians since the end of the Second World War and justification for those particular concerns.

Three main periods may be identified in the development of African historiography since the end of the Second World War. The first was the period of struggle for political independence; the second the period just before and immediately after the achievement of political independence when the chief concern was de-colonization of the main social and political institutions; and the third period when the politically independent governments begin to grapple seriously with the problems of nation building,

social reform, economic liberation, neo-colonization, neo-cultures as the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries concerns as gay cultures (Dr Duyile, 2023). It is clear that these periods merge into one another in each country and across the continent. While some countries are already seriously grappling with the problems of neo-colonialism, others are still seeking political independence cum secession tendencies. While some countries seek political independence first, others try to combine the search for political liberation with a form of society and the basic social and economic institutions of the state at the same time.

The historian sees history playing a relevant and changing role at each period. History has always been a popular weapon to achieve Independence in Africa if only because the colonial rulers had used it as a weapon of domination and frustration that came from denying basic humanity to peoples of African descent by denying that they had a history (Ofosu-Appiah, 1977). Independence activist and nationalist ideology were backed using historical standpoint, asserting much as an article of faith that Africans had not merely a history but in fact a glorious history. A well-known book of the 1950s was actually entitled *African Glory* (Ade-Ajayi, 1977).

Historians at the time of the independence movements had to go beyond asserting that Africans had a history. They had to demonstrate by the criteria of evidence acceptable to other historians not merely that African history exists, but also that it has as much time depth as the history of others, and that it contained evidence of the ability of Africans in the past to build and manage large political empires comparable to modern multi-ethnic territories seeking political independence. African historians first began by focusing attention on the periods of African antiquity when there were written references to African political achievements. They went further and demonstrated not only the indispensability of oral sources of history, but also its validity for historical writing. In the process, African historiography has changed the course of historical writing which now doubts the sufficiency of written sources alone for historical writing even when written sources appear abundant. African historiography continues to refine the methodology of using oral sources, combining them with linguistic, archaeological and other forms of evidence. The 21<sup>st</sup> century historian has an option to adopt genetic studies to support its fact in historical studies.

During the period of independence movement, the necessity was to convince or force the colonial ruler to abdicate power. The rhetoric of history was necessary to develop the right mental attitude of the leaders of the independence movements and their followers as well as to persuade the colonial rulers. Historians considered the pre-colonial period most relevant because it provided the necessary time-depth and evidence of the performance of independent African polities. In the period of decolonization, while the debate with former colonial rulers continued there was a fresh necessity to de-mythologize Europeans and persuade the rank and file of political supporters that Africans indeed had the abilities to take over power from Europeans. The process of decolonization thus involved studies of the colonial period for a more critical review of the role of Europeans, the response of Africans to European domination and the continuities that survived from the pre-colonial past to the newly emerging political structures (KI-Zerbo, 1977). Governments sought precedents for their political programmes whether parliamentary or non-parliamentary, village democracy or one party state and drew on the work of historians for such precedents.

As the Governments outgrow the slogans of the period of decolonization and begin to grapple with economic imperialism, the need for the transfer of technology and the development of a self-reliant economy, the importance of the old assertion that a sense of history is vital to the liberation of the mind and the conditioning of the nationalist begins to be challenged. An awareness of history by itself does not seem to make any difference to the attitude of people to work, their sense of values or even their patriotism and basic commitment to the future of the nation. Few, if any, are awarded scholarships to study history. The emphasis shifts from the Humanities to Science and Technology. But this does not mean that history has ceased to be relevant or that historians have ceased to search for relevance.

It needs to be emphasized that history is relevant not only as an ideological or psychological weapon in a struggle for liberation against outsiders, but also as a force in the internal development of a new society. Not only in traditional African societies, but also in many other societies as well, history has this important role as a source of values that should monitor inter-personal relationships and the relationships of people with the rest of society and the state. History may appear not directly relevant to

economic productivity and the development of technology, but to the extent that people's mental attitude is an important factor in their creativity, history obviously is core to the precedence and initiative behind technological growth. In a multi-ethnic society, proper historical perspectives are also essential to promote better inter-ethnic understanding, political stability and the emergence of a new coherent society. But to make history such a social force, the study of history alone is not enough: it is important that it should be adopted to drive growth and development. It is failure to drive initiatives of development to its citizens through history that have brought concepts like 'japa' syndrome among Nigerians.

Some historians have sought social relevance in emphasizing the social science aspects of history, the relevance of the past to an understanding or the processes of economic and social change. The undue emphasis on political achievement measured by the size of political states in the past is therefore giving way to a more balanced view of history, stressing social and economic factors, migrations, developments in the means of production, technology, the system of land tenure, etc. In the struggle against neo-colonialism and the further liberation of the rest of Africa, the old crude assertions of "you have no history, we have a history", is giving way to more sophisticated interpretations and re-interpretations of history.

The UNESCO General History of Africa project is a good example of the process of synthesizing and re-interpreting African history to make it more socially relevant. The project has emphasized the continental view of African history which focuses attention on the internal perspective and the pan-continental lines of historical movements. At the same time the project attempts to analyze and synthesize the contributions of Africans to the totality of human endeavor. In particular, it stresses the role of Africans in areas where, in spite of the facts, the African presence tends to be denied and ignored, such as in ancient Egypt, Middle East, the Americas, Europe and the Diaspora such a project gives new dimensions to the definition of the boundaries of African history, and the historical contribution of the Africans to the human society as well as encourages a more balanced and socially relevant interpretation of the African past.

The academic historians are discovering that it is not their synthesis and sophistication that effects the average person's appreciation of history as a cultural phenomenon and source of social and moral values so much as the popular view of history derived from school text books, the social media, the mass media, Ministries of Information handbooks and similar works that tend to reflect the historiography of several generations ago. It is this communication gap that tends to defeat the historians' search for social relevance. Historians that are concerned about the social functions of history have to concern themselves also with education, the proper teaching of history at all levels and the projection of history in the mass media and also the social media.

One can parallel in the other Humanities the same changing justifications. In literature, one is aware of the changing emphasis from social anthropological novels intended to persuade the foreign readers that Africans had a culture. From the clash of cultures as the most important theme of drama and novels, there is the growing concern with literature as a critique of society and source of social and moral values. In Linguistics, there is also a shift from mapping all languages and analyzing their historical development to a growing emphasis on socio-linguistics. Increasingly, linguists are asking about the role of language and education at different levels, how people use languages and what language policies ought to be pursued to take care of our diverse and sometimes contradictory needs for education, rapid technological development, contact with the outside world, the integrity and uniqueness of each language as a vehicle of culture and yet the necessity for national unity and stability. Similarly, Art, Music, and Dance are moving away from merely recording traditional forms to a more creative role of developing new cultural styles, deriving validity from serious studies of traditional forms, but seeking to adapt and evolve new forms for today's 'Gen Zs' and communities, as vehicles of entertainment, advertisement, mass communication as well as education.

Philosophy as an academic discipline is yet finding its feet, fighting against the popular prejudice that abstruse and intellectual thinking is a luxury in a developing society. Yet the rapid pace of change seems to demand the existence of a group specializing in clear logical thought in an attempt to clarify for us the meaning and direction of change in Africa.

## Conclusion

In conclusion African history has been asserting both the uniqueness and the common humanity of the African in Diaspora; 'japarians' they say these days and the African (Duyile & Nwachukwu, 2023). African American and black European and even blacks in Asia are now far apart from the African continent as thus the Pan African period. African historiography has had to chart its own course and make original contributions to the science of historical study peculiar to the African situation where there is lack of adequate documentation. It has drawn heavily on traditional historiography both in terms of the content of oral literature and other historical forms as well as the role of history in society. But African history has remained part of the development of human history responding to a changing present with new techniques and fresh pro-occupations.

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