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SOME FUNDAMENTAL TOPICS

Editors:

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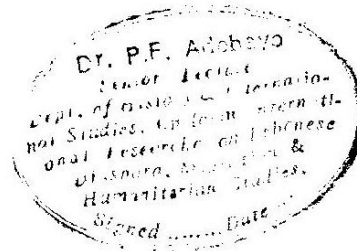
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CHAPTER FOUR

THE PLACE OF HISTORY IN NATION BUILDING

P. F. Adebayo

Introduction.

The roles and impact of history in plural or heterogeneous societies like Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. Indeed, history is the totality of all the changes that human societies have undergone. History sees the present in the light of the past and uses the past and the present to attempt a prognosis for the future.¹ It is also a critical inquiry into the events of the past with a view of establishing their meaning and relevance to the present. History is the record of events that have relevant impact on human development and management and from time immemorial history played a pivotal role and still play an important role in nation building. The place of history in nation building cannot be relegated to the background either. This paper, therefore, examines the roles of history from societal, cultural and academic perspectives. In other words, we can argue succinctly that history examines the records of events, which means that both the positive and the negative aspects of human changes are embedded or embraced in its enterprise.

Nation building, on the other hand, can be seen as all the efforts of the people in any sense, showing loyalty, dedication and commitment directed towards the actualization of a common goal or interest for national development in all ramifications. Nation building can be achieved through the value of the unity of the masses bound together in pursuit of a common purpose which could be taken as the goal of the whole community as discussed in this brief paper.

Importance of History in Nation Building.

The place of history in nation building cannot be over-emphasized. It has indeed important and fundamental roles to play in the building of any nation. History develops the world we live in by way of reconstructing the past in order to make the present better than the past. History attempts to widen 'students' experiences through the study of people at different times and places. It also provides a means to understand the process of change and continuity in human affairs as well as comparison of different societies.² In the light of this, we can suggest that the place of history in nation building is highly central and essential to the development of any nation of the world.

Since history deals with the past achievements and failures of nations, societies and individuals, it is important for any nation to know itself, to understand its relationships with other nations, societies and cultures to create a positive platform on which to build and develop itself. This argument establishes a fundamental basis for the

relevance of history in nation building. For example, the United States, during the early part of her nationhood after independence was able to survive and build a strong political and economic foundation or platform which gave room for the total transformation of its society. Indeed, beginning from the era of Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809) who was then the American president, a solid foundation was laid on which later developments which followed were decisively built.³ He was able to do this because he realized the mistakes and failures of the earlier administration which brought discomfort and social imbalance to the people. Other Presidents after him also followed his path and made improvement so that between 1830 and 1860, the United States evolved a strong Federal government and a stable and rapidly growing economy after the civil war.⁴ With her historical consciousness, and other factors, the United States became a great nation to reckon with in the whole World.

Morally, history serves as a reference point for most of Nigerian politicians as they often made reference to history. The former Military President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida) in 1986 during one of his public engagements was quoted as saying that "history will forgive you for taking a bad decision but history will never forgive you for not taking a decision at all".⁵ Suffice it to say that most Nigerian politicians often refer to history whenever they are being accused either rightly or wrongly. Many of our public office holders when criticized whether fairly or otherwise often reply that history will vindicate the righteous. This moralizing role of history tends to infuse in the public office holders a deep sense of awareness that posterity will definitely put their actions on trial.

E.H. Carr's definition of history as 'a dialogue between the past and the present' is indeed tenable at this point.⁶ This is because a clear understanding of the past throws more light on the present and thus prepares a nation for its future. In other words, the nation can learn from its success or failures of the past and can use the past occurrences to modify its activities in the present and also prepare itself for the tasks ahead. As Robert Smith has written;

...there lies the possibility of extracting from the past, lessons for the present ..and future, and therefore a means of helping humanities in the understanding and handling of its problems. These lessons are given primarily by means of specific instances but are sometimes also formulated in generalization.⁷

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that a nation cannot do without its history. In fact, history is the study of society in time perspective. A nation that abandons its history is gone for good and easily slips into oblivion. Guy Rocher was more emphatic on the relationship of history and the society when he remarked that:

Society is history. It is constantly engaged in a historical movement. In a transformation of itself, the member of its environment as of other societies which it maintains relations. These changes are more or less in harmony with the past of the society and follow a more or less explicit pattern.⁸

From another perspective, if a nation is fully aware of its past as well as its relationship with other nations, it gives such a nation opportunity to evolve a harmonious relationship and to maintain a peaceful relation with others. Also, the United States being conscious of her past with Britain and France was able to maintain a measure of diplomatic relations between the two European powers in their early years of nationhood. At a time when Britain and France were about to be engaged in a war, the USA was able to play a neutral politics between them; at that time there were of course the heavy presence of British in Canada and the whole of Louisiana and the West of Mississippi River were in the hands of France. With the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the United States still under Thomas Jefferson was able to prevent the imminent incursion by the French into a land that could have posed a threat to her existence and could have raised the possibility of taking over the territory by the British from France if the two were involved in military conflagration.⁹ This is another role and indeed a clear place of history in nation building.

Still on the role of history to the nation, B.O. Oloruntimehin in his own contribution said:

Every society is historically determined to the extent that it is a living record of importance and continuing reactions to changes in its social, economic and political life.....¹⁰

History as a Linkage between the Past and the Present.

History has also been the principal medium for the transmission of culture (e.g. for social control) including the cosmology of the people in a nation. Africans transmit their culture through educational institutions indigenous to them, which are largely associated with puberty rites, secret societies, initiation of age grades training and initiation of priest and diviners as well as those ceremonies taking place before the coronation of a new chief or king. Besides, another means of transmitting culture in Africa is through the court historians or chroniclers. In many parts of Africa there were carefully trained historians in the palaces of Kings and courts of highly placed chieftaincies. Such palace or court historians included the Arokin of the Old Oyo Empire and the Griots among the Mande people of the Western Sudan (like the Mande of Senegal, Guinea and Mali).¹¹ Highlighting the use of history as a medium of transmission of culture, B.O. Oloruntimilehin said:

Colonial masters recognized this fact and ensured that they rested their control upon the transmission of their own culture-an exercise which is selected in the transfer of economic, political and social institutions from the metro pole to the colonies and in rising of a new state of elites through the inculcation of the values and orientations of the colonizing societies.¹²

The need for every nation to know its roots as well as its relationship with other nations is in agreement with the statement of Cicero who once said, "Not to know what took place before you were born is to remain forever a child".¹³ Therefore, if any nation fails to appreciate her past and learn from it, is very much likely that such nation will achieve little or no progress and the result may be outright stagnation.

Thinking about the past must be our concern now and in the future. Without a sense of history, our personal lives and national existence would be poorer and our ability to relate with contemporary world will be inadequate. Hence, Arthur Marwick argued that 'history enables the society (and the individual within the society) to take its bearings, to place itself in relation to its own past, and in relation to other societies, so as to establish a sense of identity.'¹⁴ There is therefore the need for all pupils in schools to be given some understanding of the present world in which they live. The inclusion of current affairs and social or environmental studies in the curriculum cannot in themselves provide an adequate foundation for full understanding, identifying and proffering appropriate and effective solutions to the problems associated with nation building, with the exclusion of history. Indeed, there should be a historical perspective of the origins of contemporary situations in order to arrive at a genuine understanding of the society.

It is equally important to stress that one of the ultimate goals of history is to establish sophisticated and positive ideals of the past through the reconstruction of the past events and in which these ideals can be useful and applied in the present for the purpose of building a distinctive nation. Consequently, history plays a leading role in shaping lives and instilling sterling virtues in the people of any given nation whose activities, be they social, cultural, political, or economic, could be central to the development of any nation. John F. Kennedy is today regarded as one the greatest Presidents the United States has ever had. This is partly because within thirty days of assumption of office, he forced the whole nation of United States of America to participate in deciding in their own affairs.¹⁵ He did what no American President or any leader of the world had done today. Many American and other people across the World see him as a role model. And he is today celebrated in America and other parts of the world as a hero.

For Nigeria in particular and Africa in general, history helps to promote understanding among the diverse elements of a nation. It also promotes respect for the institutions and practices of such a nation. A nation through its history is able to give explanations on the origin of land, sea, man, and other species. Through history, a nation can also explain the basis of the different laws and customs that it has, it can also explain why it differs from other nations in terms of customs and tradition, religion and political setup.

History is an instrument capable of creating and maintaining a distinctive identity-as a nation and as a citizen of the nation, Nigeria. This identity as a nation and as the citizens of the nation could be used as a base for nation building. We need this identity to avoid the danger of merely drifting along with other nations of the World. As the international community is an aggregate of nations, each nation, including ours (Nigeria), must preserve its own distinctive character. Besides, history can provide a national ideology for the country. The French used the ideology of Francophone in their determination to preserve the independence and integrity of their nation as well as Nigeria's ideology of unity in diversity. History can also be used to promote national integration and national consciousness.¹⁶ Besides, 'it has an educational value as a training ground of the mind.'¹⁷ It can equally act as a practical guide to the problems of human society and politics.

In another way, history brings out evils of the past with accompanying consequences as a way of discouraging others to shun the behavior totally. Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini are seen today as among the most wicked leaders in the world because of the part they played in the outbreak of the Second World War.¹⁸ Considering all these, one can maintain that the role played by history in shaping lives and bringing out exemplary virtue for people to follow is not in any way trivial as these people are those who constitute a matron and some may even have the opportunity of being in a position of control or authority and that may affect the life of a nation depending on the values of such group of people or individuals.

In addition, history encompasses disciplines such as political science, sociology, international relations, diplomatic Studies, etc., all of which constitute the core ingredient that are highly essential in the issue of nation building or national development as well as international diplomacy. Thus, in this light, history is seen as a gigantic reservoir of various branches of knowledge relevant in the affairs of nation building.

Furthermore, one of the functions and objectives of teaching history in schools is to develop in children a love for their country, and an understanding of its traditions and ways of life, how the nation evolves, how its system of government emerged. Given the foregoing, its distinctive customs and traditions and its economic and social life, it would be difficult to imagine any meaningful civilization or development without a sense of history. In fact, the sophisticated societies of our time need historical knowledge and awareness to survive in that we are all constantly calling up history and making historical judgments in daily routines. It is only through the knowledge of its history that a nation whether agrarian or industrialized can have an understanding of its existence and will be able to locate its current problems and challenges in historical perspective. The past is always with us because we cannot have a full perception of the present without a strong connection with the past. History, therefore, has a crucial place and relevance in nation building since it is difficult to understand the present problem of a nation without a sound knowledge of its background and development.

The contribution of history to the general development of nations has been given universal recognition by scholars and other commentators. It has been shown that people can learn from the lessons of history to improve their nation. It was in recognition of the contribution of history to the development of Nigeria in particular, Africa and the World in general that former Military President (Head) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Ibrahim Babangida conferred the 1986 Nigeria Merit Award on Ade Ajayi, J. F. (a Professor of History and former Vice Chancellor of the University of Lagos) who thus became the 17th recipient of the Award which came into being in 1969. According to General Ibrahim Babangida, 'Ade Ajayi, J.F. was selected by the board of trustees of the Nigerian National Merit Award on the basis of his unique position as one of Africa's leading historians.'¹⁹ It has been said that he who controls the past controls the future. Our view of history shapes the way we view the present, and therefore it dictates what answers we offer for existing problems.

Medically, when you go into a doctor's office for the first time you invariably have to fill out an information sheet that asks about your medical history. Some of these forms are very detailed, asking questions that require information from rarely accessed memory banks. Why does a doctor ask these questions? The doctor is trying to construct an accurate picture of your state of health. Your health is heavily influenced by past records. Your heredity, past behavior, past experiences are all important determinants of and clues to your present condition. Whenever you return to the doctor, he or she pulls out a file which contains all the notes from past visits. This is a file history of your health. Doctors understand very clearly that past records matter a lot in order for them to determine the current state of health of their patients.

There is no doubting the fact that history contributes its own quota to the general or overall development of the society (nation). There have been queries and arguments in the mass media about the relevance of teaching the humanities (including history) and the social sciences in the institutions of our country (Nigeria). The contention of those who argue against the teaching of the humanities and the social sciences is that Nigeria is now struggling for technological development and that the humanities and social sciences cannot contribute meaningfully to the attainment of technological developments in the country. People tend to have respect for professions like Law, Accounting, Medicine, Estate Management etc., which they argue are highly utilitarian and they therefore question the relevance of humanities (including history) and social sciences to a nation.

Michael Omolewa has cautioned Nigeria to trend softly in giving preferential treatment to the sciences at the expense of other discipline in the educational system.²⁰ In his opinion, the sciences, the arts and the humanities should go together for the complete education of the individual. He remarked further: "if you teach a person in science

without teaching his mind and faculty to be humane and rationale, you would probably end up having a nuclear bomb and in throwing that bomb arbitrarily without thinking of humanity".²¹ In spite of the prejudices expressed against the teaching of humanities (including history) and the social sciences history remains a popular subject and a regular feature of the curriculum from the primary to the University level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be seen from our discussions that history has a major role to play and in fact occupies a great place in the building of any nation. History will continue to play an important role in nation building, especially in this socially complex and naturally distinct and sometimes threatening environment of ours. This is because people will be helped to cope with a bewildering world as they have some understanding of political power and economic history, knowledge of misuse and abuse of political power, the long-term effects of policies, and the complexity of causes and effects. Therefore, if any nation of the world is to attain great heights, it must begin to realize and appreciate the essence of history in the conceptual understanding of nation building and its constant validity in functional answers and solutions to the major problems of the nation. From the above, we can conclude by highlighting the major role of history in nation building as ascertaining or solving of societal problems, transmission of culture, creation and maintaining a distinctive identity for a nation, provision of a national ideology for a country or nation, promotion of national integration and conscious respect, for the institutions and practices of such a nation serving as meeting ground for several other disciplines, and the promotion of understanding, among diverse elements of a nation. From the foregoing, the role of history in nation building can be clearly perceived from the various illustrations and explanations provided above.

Notes and References

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