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# A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY AND MORALITY

LEMUEL EKEDEGWA ODEH

## Introduction

Barracclough

G. (1956) defines history as an "attempt to discover on the basis of fragmentary evidence of the significant things about the past". The most important word to note in this definition is "discover". This means that the task of history is for historian to discover or find out what happened in the past. From the above definition, it is also clear that historians are not only concerned with what happened in the past but the "Significant" things about the past.

Another scholar G.R. Collingwoods (1956) defines history as a "Study at once critical and constructive whose field is the human past and its entirety and whose method is the construction of the past from documents written and unwritten critically analysed and interpreted". This definition gives us an insight into the kind of understanding the historian aims at. It does this by introducing the twin elements of analysis and interpretation to historical research. Thus, history is not just a body of ascertained facts, it also involves the analysis and interpretation of such facts. It is difficult for historians to reconstruct the past in its entirety because the past has vanished and what the historian are left with are fragmentary evidence, which at best could only be faint reflections of the actual past.

The other level of meaning of the word history is that which is invoked when one speaks of history as an academic discipline and as a systematic study of the past. This is the idea that is conveyed usually when one talks of, a Professor of "history" or a degree in history.

The second sense of history is the most regular notion of history and it is with this that this paper shall be mostly concerned with

The study of human past events is the primary focus of historians. Traditional African societies view life as an intensity i.e. life after death. A given community is seen, not just as a self contained entity with defined physical boundaries, but as part of a continuum, which extended back into the period of the ancestors and stretched forward into the future. Thus, in traditional African societies, there is an intimate relationship between the ancestors, the living and the unborn. The three are the generation yet unborn as well as living where all are seen as part of an existing society (Robert, 1971).

The rules of interpretation and analysis have introduced an objective element into historical writing. This is because the historian is intimately involved in the task of historical writing when he is interpreting and analysing data. He brings these bases, prejudices, experiences and general outlook to life to bear on his work. This explains why different historians give different explanations to the same event.

For instance, several historians have attempted to explain the cause of the fall of the old Oyo Empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century as an attributory factor of the inherent weakness of the constitution of the Empire that the Alafin could not handle (Robin 1971). Atanda (1973) however sees it differently as the over ambition of the functionaries of the central government, while Rev. Samuel Johnson (1956) has another interpretation of the fall of the empire in his work *History of the Yorubas*. According to him, the fall of Oyo represents the punishment of the inhabitants by God as punishment for their iniquities, thereby introducing moral guideline into historic events.

Thus in traditional African society each community is founded by an ancestor or group of ancestors who also established the basic social institutions in the community. Future development of the society must therefore be established on the basic charter already mapped out by the ancestors so as not to endanger the linkage between the dead (ancestor) and the living.

Furthermore, as a result of the concern for continuity in traditional African society, history as the past is seen as a very crucial issue that possessed a perpetual significance for the present and it is made to perform some functions in the society.

1. History is used to define the origin and corporate existence of group of communities. It is only through history that some

knowledge of the lineage, group or community, could be studied, achievement, heroes and villain.

2. History is further used as a means of keeping the society together and to sustain the inter-group roles.

- (a) History serves as guide to knowledge on issues like the structure of political authority, Kingship ties, and structure of Chieftaincy title; for example, people resort to history as an arbiter in cases of rival claims of ownership of land, chieftaincy ascendancy etc. (Eliagwu 2006)
- (b) History is used to also inculcate sound morals into people. The deed of the past heroes were cited as immutable examples while faults of villains were also singled out as pitfalls to be avoided by members of the society. Historical examples were also cited as an authority to justify specific stands on moral issues. For example Thou shall not steal, kill nor convert thy neighbour's wife in the Bible and other similar injunctions in the Holy Quran.
- (c) History was also used to boast the morale of the society and to safeguard its communal mental security. Important episodes and glorious achievement of the past were related or re-enacted in the form of festival so as to make the people proud of their heritage. An example of such festivals was the Aliekwu deity among the Otukpos commemorating the deeds of ancestors, while on the one hand, unpleasant episodes of the past like defeat in wars were de-emphasized and most times removed from the people's oral or written traditions (Odaudu 2006)

History is preserved in the memories of the professional historian and billiard singers at the courts of the rulers. Examples of these professional historians were the Griots of the Western Sudan, the Arokin of Old Oyo and the Ihogbe of the Benin Kingdom. Their duty was to compile accurate genealogies of rulers and their notable achievements, which they recited on special occasions such as death of a ruler or an elderly person or the enthronement of his successor. History is also enshrouded in the oral literature of divinatory cults even among the people of Otukpo in their Aliekwu (Elaigwu op. cit.).

Among the Yoruba, the oral literature of the cult of Ifa (a local deity) called 'Odu Ifa' is believed to contain among other things, report of past events and ideas like names of settlements, people and objects that existed in the past. (Boahen 1966).

Among the Otukpo people, history is also preserved in appellations and cognomens (e.g. Aliekwu incantations of past) of people's towns. Human cognomens reflected the origin and achievements of the individual or group concerned. Cognomen of towns reflected their lineages and highlighted the important achievements of any prominent lineage. Proverbs and songs were also used to preserve history and ritual re-enactments, ceremonies and festivals all served as repositories of historical knowledge (Itodo 2000).

While in the Benin Kingdom history is also recorded in art, example the coming of Europeans into the Kingdom and introduction of firearms by them were well preserved in carvings and are still in existence till date (Ryder 1969)

### Myths

According to the illustrated *Oxford Dictionary*, a myth is a sacred account of an event which took place in primordial times and which though may contain some facts, have been fabricated that some kernel of truth is virtually suppressed. Because of the suppression of historical events, people tend to dismiss myths as being useless. It is the same suppression which made Voltaire to comment that "myths of origins are absurd, valid for all types of myths".

Myths lack all the basic characteristic of history. The only pretension that they make to be near history is that they deal with the past. But even the way a myth deals with the past is not the same as history deals with it; myths deal with dateless past which is remote, that nobody knows when they were or has an idea of what period they were referring to. Thus, a myth begins with such imprecise phrase as "Once upon a time", "long ago", "at that time" etc. In short, it is outside a time reckoning and chronological historical approach.

The wisdom of the tortoise "Ekinabo" as the king of all the animals in Otukpo folklore shows the events narrated are more of miracles than of reality (Adoma 2006).

A myth therefore is a figment of imagination. Most important is that a myth is not concerned with human activities. All the dramatist personae/characters are gods, spirits and super humans.

### Theocratic Account

This is a little higher than myth. In fact R.G. Collingwood referred to it as theocratic history. The word THEO is a Greek word meaning GOD. Theocratic accounts are accounts concerning the activities of god(s) or activities in which human beings are directed by God or are seen as the instruments of the divine. Examples of these are the Holy Bible and the Holy Quran.

A good example of Theocratic account is the Ten commandments, God wants everybody to obey them and they form moral instructions and guidelines. Virtually, every ethnic group has them. One major advantage of theocratic account over myth is that it is realistic and possible to date the events e.g. the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ, the flight of the Holy Prophet Mohammed etc.

However, the purpose of history differs from that of theocratic accounts. History attempts to give an insight into human activities in the past with a view to understanding the present while the purpose of theocratic account is the identification of divine action, nature and purpose for which man should follow dogmatically. Take the Bible or the Quran as an example. The Bible started from somewhere and went on towards Jesus, likewise the Quran and the moral instructions. Thus you find in this Holy Books certain do's and don't's and the repercussion for them.

### History as Guide for Moral Instructions

Both Islam and Christianity see history as having been ordered by God. Their views are linked with the role of providence or God in human affairs, thus, one can tag those views as the providential views of history. (Emphasis mine).

St Augustine's *City of God* (1922) is an example of the Christian view of history. According to him, history is ordered by a higher power. Great turning points in history are representatives of the divine providence of God; the rise and fall of states thus depended upon God. In

his work. St. Augustine categorized world history into seven epochs, which he relates to the creative powers of God. He used the Bible which in a sense is another historical work as the basis of his categorization. He traced human history from Adam to the advent of Jesus Christ. The contemporary world according to him in the second last stage in human history God shall close human history at the end of the world by judging mankind and bringing the righteous back to Paradise from where man was initially expelled.

This view of history can be described as a cyclical one because it traces human history from Adam in the Garden of Eden-Paradise through several other stages and returns back to paradise again. A number of other early Christian writers like St Jerome, Venerable Bede, Sextons Julius Afrianuis shared this view of history. They could discern the workings of God in the universe, and the central purpose of God is to return man to paradise. And this is where Jesus Christ comes into the picture. He is seen as one sent by God to show man the way to salvation.

Thus the Christian view of historical development is intricately linked with the role of God in human affairs. History is seen as the fulfillment of certain prophecies as certain plans of God. They also see history as a means to study the past and as a vehicle of moral and religious teachings. According to them, it possesses practical utility and educative value.

### Islamic View of History

Islam is conceived as a historical religion. This is because of the following reasons. One, Prophet Mohammed himself was the culmination and fulfilment of a historical process which began at the beginning of the world and was leading to the end of the world. He thus fostered on awareness of history. Secondly in the development of Islamic civilization, great emphasis was placed on historical precedent. The events and ideas of the early Islamic era was provided as the precedent for later age. This helped to sharpen the historical consciousness of Muslims (Ibn Battuta 1957).

Muslims see history as God's chosen instrument for the gradual improvement of mankind and for man's preparation for the final reckoning at the inevitable end of world. Thus, the purpose of history is clearly revealed to all by the conceiving of Prophet Muhammed and

Islam. The control of history's progress from then on was within the reach of human beings if they followed God's plan for their lives as laid out in Islamic injunction.

One such notable Islamic scholar was Ibn Khaldun of Tunis (1332-1406). Ibn Khaldun's work, *Universal History* covered even non-muslim areas. In 1377, he constructed a coherent system of the historical process in purely human terms and devoted his *Muqaddimah* (Introduction to his *Universal History*) to its exposition. According to him, human society is patterned on certain material and psychological forces where operations provoke changes in the society. He saw history as a cyclic motion, with slight but continuous forward movement of growth and decay within the various forms of human societies.

Thus, it is clear now that the Muslims see history as serving the purpose of God in human affairs. They also consider the study of history to be of immense practical importance. According to Muslim historiography, history is useful because of the following reasons.

1. It teaches by giving both negative and positive examples
2. It teaches people how to handle their own affairs in this fleeting world.
3. It teaches political leaders how to govern properly.

Lastly, it is instructive and edifying as a handmaiden religion. It proves the truth of Islam and the correctness of the world view as expounded by Islamic injunctions.

### Conclusion

From all the discussion above, it becomes very clear that history is a subject that creates an enabling environment for the scholar to undertake a journey through the past so as to help him in understanding the present and make a better appraisal of life based on historical experience.

History also on the one hand has been used by both religions of Islam and Christian as vanguard for moral guidelines in the society. Both religions have always enjoined moral uprightness in the society that is fraught with corruption, killings, Armed Robbery, Political thuggery to just mention a few. If the actors of all these heinous crimes take a walk in religious injunction they will surely refrain and the society at large shall be the better for it.

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