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THE RELEVANCE OF HISTORY IN ACTUALIZING NATIONAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL STABILITY: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE, 1999-2014

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Abstract

'National identity' is a collective phenomenon; it denotes a group's identification of itself as one. On its part, 'social stability' is a situation whereby social solidarity exists among diverse groups in a society. However, with particular emphasis on Nigeria, since independence in 1960, due to the fact that the country is made up of many ethnic nationalities, Nigeria has found it difficult to actualize desired national identity and effective social stability. The enthronement of civil democratic government since May 1999 has failed to actualize cohesive national identity and an orderly social stability; rather there have been recurring political, religious, ethnic and socio-economic crises across the nation, from 1999 up till 2014. Against this backdrop, this paper utilizes diverse secondary sources and the eclectic approach and argues that Nigeria's quest for a cohesive national identity and social stability will remain an illusion if it continues to neglect its past. The paper recommends the knowledge of Nigerian History through its teaching from the primary to the tertiary level as the best means to actualize a sustained national identity and social stability. This is because our understanding of Nigerian history will indeed act as a bridge that connects the past with the present and points the road to the future; thereby enhance patriotism and national unity among the diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Keywords: Relevance, History, Actualization, Cohesive, National Identity, Social Stability

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INTRODUCTION

On 1st January 2014, Nigeria marked the centenary of its amalgamation by the British colonial government. The celebration of the unification of Northern and Southern Protectorates that gave birth to Nigeria buttressed the fact that the country has come of age in its existence. Although the amalgamation has been described variously by commentators in manners that suited them, which includes that 'it as the mistake of 1914' (Awolowo, 1947: 47-48). Others argue that based on its past, the Nigerian nation-state is a political entity, although with lots of troubles (Achebe, 1983). The lack of confidence in the sustainability of the Nigerian nation-state continued, as Crowder (1978:11) aptly observes:

Any country is in a sense, an artificial creation. In the case of Nigeria however, union was so sudden, and included such widely differing groups of peoples that not only the British, who created it, but the inhabitants themselves have often doubted whether it could survive as a political entity

The above pessimistic views on the fate of the Nigerian nation-state were also the views of most of its citizens for the greater part of the colonial period, up to the post-independence period;

and even till date. Diverse socio-economic cum political crises that have been witnessed in Nigeria seem to support the views that the foundation of the Nigerian state was laid on weak foundation. The indigenous political leaders took full charge of affairs as from October 1960, but their mal-administration of the country in the 1960s led to the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war in 1967. After thirty months of hostilities, the secessionist Biafra was defeated in January 1970 and its people were re-integrated into a one-united Nigerian nation-state.

The post-civil war period of the early 1970s witnessed measures aimed to re-assure all Nigerians, especially the Igbo that Nigeria is a united country. These manifested in the policies of reconciliation, rehabilitation, reconstruction, and rejuvenation embarked upon by the administration of General Yakubu Gowon. The period of the 1970s and the 1980s witnessed general political and socio-economic restructuring; given surplus revenue accrued to the country by the sale of its petroleum products during the period till the early 1980s. Despite the enormous wealth accrued to the country in the "oil boom period", its political leaders were unable to utilize these to the benefits of the citizenry. This state of affairs led to

disenchantment and loss of faith in the fatherland by most people, especially the youths. The inauguration of a civilian democratic presidential system of government on May 29, 1999 initially gave hope to the rebirth of Nigeria after many years of military rule. However, this new hope was dashed as series of socio-economic cum political, religious and inter-ethnic crises across the nation-state seem to give credence to the fact that the creation of the Nigerian state was a 'mistake' made by the British colonial government. The series of crises in the Nigerian state since 1999 revolves around 'The National Question'. Accordingly, Ikime (2008:90) argues that the 'National Question' has to do with inter-relationships between the nationalities that make up the Nigerian nation-state, as well as between them and the nation-state they constitute.

Some known characteristics of the National Question that have remained un-answered include the followings: resource control, lopsided fiscal federalism and the vexed issue of revenue allocation to the different segments of the country; the interpretation of the secularity of the Nigerian nation-state as a multi-religious state. The latter has caused lots of problems, especially with the emergence of the Boko Haram Islamic fundamentalist sect since 2002, which has unleashed terror on Nigerians, particularly in the Northern section of the country. Perhaps, as the 'National Question' remain un-answered, Nigerian political unity remains in doubt. It is in doubt as a result of the non-existence of a cohesive national identity and an enabling social stability that will enable the citizens to have the desired confidence in their fatherland.

In simple terminology, National Identity implies an individual's sense of belonging to one nation-state. However, from a more general perspective, National Identity is seen as a collective phenomenon- as a property of a group. Consequently, National Identity is a group's definition of itself as a group- its conception of its enduring characteristics and basic values; its strength and weaknesses, its hopes and fears, its reputations and conditions of existence, its institutions and traditions; and its past history, current purposes and future prospects (Kelman, 1977: 165-189). Thus, in so far as a group of people have come to see themselves as constituting a unique identifiable entity, with a claim to continuity over time, to unity across geographical distance and the right to various forms of expression; we can conclude that such group should have acquired a sense of national identity.

National Identity has also been described as the depiction of a 'whole', encompassing its culture, traditions, language and politics (<http://dictionary.com>). Furthermore, it is not an unborn trait, as studies have shown that a person's national identity is a direct result of the presence of elements from the 'common points' in peoples' daily lives. 'Common point' here denotes what members of the large group come across in the process of their interaction. Thus, in the course of interaction within the group, certain traits and symbols that represent their national identity emanate. Examples are national symbols, language, national flag, national colours, national history, national consciousness, etc. Holistically, national identity is about shared values (<http://en.wikipedia.org>).

There are two major components of national identity: the first refers to the characteristics shared by members of the national

community (nation-state) and includes language, religion, material expression of culture, shared values etc. The second component manifests in the individual's feelings and self identification as a national of such nation-state. Thus, feeling Nigerian is an important component of self perception, of feeling a sense of belonging to our beloved country, Nigeria. The individual feeling also manifests in his national consciousness, which is very significant. However, the reverse of the above characteristics of national identity seems to be the case in Nigeria in recent times. This is because in practice, although, Nigeria is a multi-ethnic cum multi-cultural country; while most of its nationals can identify almost instinctively with their ethnic groups, they find it difficult to identify with the nation-state.

It is common to notice Nigerians who see themselves more as Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa/Fulani, and Niger Delta/Ijaw, etc. No doubt, this tendency coupled with the rising recurring social instability has continued to undermine the harmonious existence of the Nigerian nation-state. The major reason being that rather than integrating into a cohesive community with a common sense of national identity, citizens of Nigeria are returning more to primordial affiliations for identity, loyalty and security. With emphasis on social stability, it is a situation whereby there exists stability between people and they work together to make the society better (<http://www.answers.com>). Every society and groups in the world work to have stability because a major challenge that faces all societies is the maintenance of social stability. Against this backdrop, the best manner to preserve social stability is to safeguard peoples' rights as laid down in the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria. If peoples' rights are guaranteed, a balance can be found between the government and the different interest groups. A nation where peoples' rights are respected and there exists equitable distribution of resources witness social stability, while there exists lots of social instabilities is nation-states where reverse is the norm.

In the case of the Nigerian nation-state, social instability has been a recurring decimal since 1999 when the current civilian democratic dispensation began. The instabilities have been manifesting in diverse forms to the extent that all and sundry, including members of the international community have shown concern on the level of insecurity and social instability in the country. Some commentators argue that this state of affairs exists due to the non-existence of fairness and social justice and that if this continues; it may spell doom for the country. Adedeji (1999:138-139) observes:

The survival of societies is possible only in so far as their members and their various institutions and functionaries exhibit self-restraint, fairness, equity and justice in the exercise of their power. Where greed, selfishness, dishonesty, infidelity, corruption and lack of trust are pervasive, justice is conspicuously absent.

The observation above seems to represent the situation in Nigeria since 1999 that has led to lots of political and social instabilities across the country, exacerbated by the fact that most Nigerians have no knowledge of the relevance of history in ensuring cohesiveness within the nation-state.

The Sad Fate of Historical Studies in Nigeria

There is a saying which stresses that “every nation builds its future on history”. However, this does not apply to Nigeria, as since the mid 1970s, successive governments at different levels have continued to undermine the study of history in primary and secondary schools. Curriculum designers and implementers have not bothered to give the study of history its rightful place, rather they have replaced history with such subjects as Civics and Social Studies, arguing that history is integrated into these subjects. It is ironic that these modern days Nigerian policy makers were taught history during their years in primary and secondary schools. The major reason for this is inconsistent government education policies that have undermined the role of History in National Development. Consequently, most Nigerians are unaware of the history of this nation, neither do they know the relevance of History in solving our numerous socio-economic cum political problems; and the role of History in our continued process of nation-building.

The above view is shared by many professional historians in Nigeria. Specifically, Asiwaju (1984:77-83) observes many years ago that in Nigeria despite the existence of flourishing historical scholarship for decades, the abysmal ignorance still displayed about Nigerian history even by highly placed Nigerians must necessarily give serious concerns to Nigerian historians. This observation was made in the 1970s, when situation was manageable; but as from the 1990s till date, despite series of efforts made by the Historical Society of Nigeria (HSN) on the need for the teaching and inculcation of Nigerian history in homes and schools, the study of Nigerian history remain undermined till date. No doubt, the non-inculcation of Nigerian history on the citizenry could be a contributory factor to the myriad of socio-political cum economic problems bedeviling Nigeria, especially as from the 1990s.

History and Its Relevance to Society

Since the return to civil democratic rule in Nigeria from May 29, 1999, successive political leaders and policy makers in Nigeria have failed to understand that knowledge of History is a basic need in all human societies, for that knowledge holds the key to any meaningful understanding of how what is has come to be. Thus, for several reasons that ranged from poor societal perception of the subject, lackadaisical attitude of governments at various levels, that includes the Ministry of Education at both state and federal levels towards History in particular and the Humanities in general, most students in the secondary schools developed negative attitude towards the learning of History. The Nigerian society fails to understand that even when man does not consciously acknowledge his dependence on knowledge acquired from History, his every act is conditioned by his understanding and perception of his past. What then is History? Carr (1962:62) defines History as ‘the serious process of inquiry into the past of man in society’. Similarly, history has been described as the record of human experiences, and a body of knowledge about the past acts of man in society, which consists of facts ascertained through honest inquiry, as well as inferences, interpretations and generalizations arrived at by the Historian; and is available in

the form of true records on paper or in the memory of man (Ifemeje, 1986: 2). In his own view of History, Daniels (1973:3) observes that History is the memory of human group experience. He continues that if it is forgotten or ignored, we cease in that measure to be humans; without History, we have no knowledge of who we are or how we came to be. On his own part, Marwick (2001:31) stresses that History is a necessity; because individuals, communities, societies could scarcely exist if all knowledge of the past was wiped out. He argues further that as memory is to the individual, so History is to the community or society. Without memory, individuals had great difficulty in relating to others, in finding their bearings, in taking intelligent decisions and lose their sense of identity. Thus, a society without History would be in a similar condition. Knowledge of History through studying it enables us to understand other people and their societies. Thus, just as it is impossible to understand institution and ideas well without knowing their history, it is also impossible to understand other people without knowing their history. This is applicable in the Nigerian situation due to the fact that we are a multi-ethnic nation-state with diverse cultures and values. In this scenario, as a result of this diversity, the tendency to misunderstand each other cannot be ruled out.

However, by knowledge of History, which preserves the traditional and cultural values of a nation, and serves as a beacon of light guiding society in confronting various crises, Nigeria can overcome some of its crises and the citizens will understand that our diversities should be appreciated, and thus appreciate the reason to have a sense of belonging and acknowledge our national identities. The knowledge of History will further enable people to realize that History is indeed a bridge connecting the past with the present and pointing the road to the future. The importance of History also lies in its capacity to help one draw conclusions from past events. Thus, it is to human race, what memory is to each man. History sheds the light of the past upon the present, thereby helping one to understand oneself, by making one acquainted with others.

While writing many decades ago, Collinwood (1964:10) argues that the greatest value of historical knowledge is that it reveals potentials and limitations of men in time perspective. History is generally a means to understand the past and present. The different interpretations of the past allow us to see the present differently and therefore imagine and work towards different future. History is also a bridge to other disciplines, because in order to understand the other humanities, social sciences, and the sciences and other diverse disciplines, one needs an historical overview. It therefore prepares us to live more humanely in the present and to face the challenges of the future because it provides us with understanding of the human condition. Historians analyze and interpret the human past that enables us to study continuity and change over time.

At this juncture, it is vital to stress that not all past human activities is history. An event is ‘historical’ or becomes a subject matter of history if it has social significance. Thus, it is not all analysis and interpretations of materials that makes history. For instance, some professional writings are merely the intelligent exercise of analyzed materials, but may lack a sense of the past; this does not have historical characteristics,

and therefore is no history. As further stressed Carr (1962:30) the reconstruction of the past in the historian's mind is dependent on empirical evidence. He concludes that history is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past. It is also worthy to stress here that a vital characteristic of history, which most other disciplines seem to lack is its ubiquity –the fact that history exists in every community of people, whether the people are literate, illiterate, advanced or developing. Every people have a history at every stage of their existence as a group; thus there are no people without a history because societies exist in time rather than space. History has some basic qualities that include: its humanistic nature, the fact that history is all about the actions of man; another quality is that it must be rational, which denotes that there must be an undisputable reasons for accepting the claim of history as what actually happened in the past. A corollary of rationality in history is that it must also be scientific, that is subjected to diverse forms of interpretations and analyses before conclusions are drawn. Another quality of history is its society-centeredness, which implies that history is more about man in society than man outside society-that history is more about society than about individuals; thus it is all about man and his actions in society (Ifemeje, 1988: 9).

From the foregoing, we can assert that history is very relevant to the larger society. This fact is further buttressed by Kissinger (1978:24-35) who observes that:

A state achieves identity only through the consciousness of a common history. This is the only experience nations have, the only possibility of learning from themselves. Thus, history is memory of state.

By the above statement, Dr Henry Kissinger (former U.S. Secretary of State) reaffirmed that History is the unending dialogue between the past and the present; it makes it possible for experiences gained from our knowledge of the past to be used in present realities. This being the case in the United States and other countries that hold their history is high esteem; where lies the fate of many countries in Africa, especially Nigeria that has refused to make use of its past? The answer to this question is obvious, Nigeria, due to the lack of political will by its political leaders to bring historical scholarship to the fore, the nation is currently bedeviled by many problems caused by the non utilization of its past to make things better both now and in the future.

Conclusion: Knowledge of Nigerian History: A Panacea to Uncoordinated National Identity and Social Stability since 1999

At the beginning of this paper, we did note that the Nigerian nation-state was created by the British colonial government in 1914. We also observed the doubts in the minds of many commentators on the sustainability of Nigeria, given the manner of its creation. We also highlighted some political and socio- economic problems during the colonial and post-colonial periods that denied the nation-state a cohesive national identity and social stability as a result of recurring crises that undermined the country's unity on several occasions.

We also emphasized the fate of history in and relevance of History to the larger society, and the fact that knowledge of history through its study has not been given the required attention in Nigeria. The myriads of socio-economic cum political problems persist in Nigeria, and can even be said to have gotten worse from 1999, when a civilian democratic government was enthroned. The inauguration of a democratically elected government and the implementation of the 1999 Constitution in a democratic society gave rise to the emergence of different groups representing diverse interests. In this category were The Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the revival of activities of the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF); among many ethnic/sectional based groups that sprung up to 'protect' their sectional interests, thereby undermining the larger and more vital national interest. The activities of some of these groups (especially those of their youth arms) undermined cohesive national identity and led to social instability across the nation.

As from 1999, the diverse ethnic/sectional militia in the Niger Delta Region engaged in subversive activities on Nigeria's petroleum production, the main source of the nation's foreign exchange. In disguise of fighting for 'Resource Control', these sectional groups unleashed fear and terror on the petroleum installations located in many parts of the region, which activities had adverse impact on the nation's petroleum production output, as well as on her foreign exchange earnings, which declined drastically. Other militia groups across the country were not left out, as they also undermined the nation-state in diverse forms, citing marginalization of their ethnic/sectional groups as reason for their actions against the Nigerian nation-state. The emergence of the Islamic fundamentalist group known as *Boko Haram* into national limelight as from 2002 exacerbated cases of social instability across the country from then till date.

The above scenario is the current situation in Nigeria, as people continue to live in fear due to insecurity in diverse forms. No doubt, this state of affairs could have been drastically reduced if most Nigerians are aware of the history of their country. Thus, for many decades, especially from the 1970s, when most of the perpetrators of these subversive acts against the Nigerian nation-state were born, the teaching of history in general and Nigerian history in particular was undermined. Due to the fact that they (youths) lack knowledge of the past, they could not benefit from history and as such failed to understand themselves and their backgrounds, and failed to be acquainted with other people in Nigeria from diverse backgrounds. As a result of the lack of knowledge of Nigerian history, many do not know that historical knowledge prepares us to live more humanely in the present so as to be able to meet the challenges of the future, because knowledge of history provides us with understanding of the human condition. Finally, it is recommended here that governments at the three tiers and policy makers at different levels should begin to encourage (urgently) the teaching of Nigerian history in the primary and secondary schools. This is a vital formative stage of the individual- as a fact learnt from childhood to adolescence is often retained permanently.

The youths being future leaders of the country must be inculcated with knowledge of Nigerian past for the desired national identity and social stability to be actualized at all times, both now and in the future. Nigerian political leaders and policy makers should realize that only a polity with shared values, common goals, vision, and a sense of collective commitment to always do that which is right, proper and just can be cohesive and dynamic. In such a nation, every citizen is a stakeholder whose patriotism is total and whose commitment is unquestionable. This is desirable and achievable in Nigeria if the teaching of Nigerian History in our schools takes immediate effect, and with the existence of purposeful/selfless leaders, cohesive national identity and social stability can be actualized.

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