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The Role of Historical Societies in Nigeria's Development¹

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Abstract

This article examines the contributions of historical societies to the development of their communities. Using the Nigerian example, it posits that a distinguishing feature of historical societies is in their quest to promote a sense of history among members of a given group or society. This salient feature of such organizations enables them to play a significant role in the task of national development. It proceeds to demonstrate that in promoting historical awareness, the role of such societies is inextricably tied to the role of history as a discipline in national development. Having demonstrated the role of historical societies to national development, the article concludes that since development is a product of change, and the subject matter of history focuses on continuity and change, it follows that development can only be understood and appreciated within the context of history. It is this strategic role of history in facilitating development that makes historical societies incubators of development.

Résumé

Cet article étudie les contributions des associations d'historiens au développement de leurs communautés. En utilisant l'exemple du Nigeria, il postule qu'il existe une caractéristique bien distincte de ces associations dans leur quête d'un sens de l'histoire chez les membres d'un groupe ou d'une société. Ce trait saillant de telles associations leur permet de jouer un rôle d'importance dans la tâche du développement national. Elles s'appliquent à démontrer qu'en suscitant une prise de conscience historique, leur rôle est inextricablement lié au rôle de l'histoire en tant que discipline liée au développement national. Ayant démontré le rôle des associations d'historiens en matière de développement national, cet article en conclut que puisque le développement est un produit du changement

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et que la matière de l'histoire porte essentiellement sur la continuité et le changement, il s'ensuit que le développement ne peut être compris et apprécié que dans le contexte de l'histoire. C'est ce rôle stratégique de l'histoire dans la facilitation du développement qui fait de ces associations d'historiens des incubateurs du développement.

Preliminary Remarks

There is a nexus between the 'role of history in national development' and the 'role of historical societies in national development'. It is in appreciating the former that we can effectively anchor the latter. Put differently, to appreciate the role of historical societies in national development, we must, even if briefly, dwell on the role of history in national development. Our first submission is that both topics are inextricably fused together. This is so because central to the aims and objectives of the Historical Society of Nigeria and indeed other historical societies all over the world is the desire to promote historical awareness of members of a given group or society. For instance, section 4(1) of the constitution of the Historical Society of Nigeria (HSN) provides that the aims and objectives of the society shall be 'To vigorously promote, support, strengthen and uphold the study of Nigerian History and historical scholarship' (Constitution of the HSN 2007). Another sub-section goes further to include as the society's *raison d'être* the promotion 'of an enduring sense of history and historical consciousness amongst the citizens'" (Constitution of the HSN 2007, s4(4). In other words, its focus is not just professional academic practitioners but the entire Nigerian citizenry.

The Historical Society of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the USA, which was established in 1843, and has metamorphosed into the current Lutheran Historical Society (LHS), has as its objective

to preserve, to document, and to stir interest in the rich Lutheran traditions which are the foundation of the church in the Middle Atlantic and adjoining areas. Specifically, the Society intends to foster knowledge and use of Lutheran history in the synods and congregations which comprise Region 8 of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (Article II Section 1, Constitution of the Lutheran Historical Society n.d.)

Apart from the objective of the LHS being in tandem with our earlier assertion concerning historical societies generally seeking to promote historical studies and consciousness, the LHS offers more. It brings to the fore the fact that people can come together as a group to promote an aspect of historical studies that is of interest to them. This, we believe, is the case of

Bonny Historical Society, one of the very few existing in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It is commendable that such an organization exists in Bonny, but not surprising. Given the rich history of this ancient kingdom, the strategic role it has played and is still playing in Nigeria's economic scene, there is definitely a good case for the preservation and promotion of its history; it is a task we believe the Bonny Historical Society is already living up to. For, in being involved in celebrating the tenth anniversary of the coronation of the Amanyanabo of Bonny, it is simultaneously promoting Bonny's history and tradition and therefore contributing significantly to national development, as will be demonstrated shortly.

At the international level, the central objective of historical societies remains the same. The Association of African Historians, which is a Pan-African association with its headquarters at Bamako in the Republic of Mali, seeks to contribute to 'the development of Historical Studies in Africa, and making African History known especially through writing and promoting regional and continental histories' (Constitution of AAH 2001). It is, therefore, the case that historical societies basically create public awareness of the rich historical heritage of a nation, a state, city or community. They promote, develop, exhibit and preserve the history of a people while serving as a resource to everyone interested in history, including private citizens, public officials, students, educators and researchers. Usually historical societies are non-profit organizations.

In the Nigerian area, the Historical Society of Nigeria is the first of this type of organization to exist. Established in 1955, it is the oldest registered professional academic association in Nigeria. Its main focus is the promotion of Nigerian and African history globally. It does so through research, publications, conferences, seminars and training. Prominent among its publications are the *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* and the *Tarikh* series, both of which have recently been resuscitated in the last three years. The HSN also has to its credit several book publications on various aspects of Nigerian and African history. Furthermore, the society has acted as mid-wife to several other affiliated organizations that share similar aims and objectives. Apart from the relatively new Bonny Historical Society, there is the vibrant Students Historical Society of Nigeria, which exists in many tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The HSN has continued to nurture and provide guidance to these other affiliated organizations. It is to the credit of the founding fathers of the HSN that the structures they erected over five decades ago have continued to be relevant in spite of the suffocating stresses and strains that confront the discipline and practice of history. In 2005, the Historical

Society of Nigeria celebrated its fiftieth anniversary at the University of Ibadan from where it all began.

The logical question to ask at this juncture is why people come together to promote the cause of historical studies. This, we argue, is because of the intrinsic utilitarian values of history. It is therefore in appreciating the role of history in society that we will appreciate the place of historical societies in national development. Before we interrogate these two issues, we must agree with Obaro Ikime that in constantly seeking to interrogate the role of history in national development, there is a supposition that history as a discipline requires validation (Ikime 2006:145). This is because historical studies have been the subject of a brutal assault by successive Nigerian governments in the past two decades. Historical studies have been virtually extinguished from Nigerian primary and secondary school curricula. At the tertiary level some departments of history, in the quest for survival, have put on the toga of international relations and at other times diplomatic/strategic studies. Prominent among them are the universities of Benin, Lagos, Uyo and Ambrose Alli University. The impression is that history can no longer survive on its own. The situation is indeed tragic. All these are the product of ignorant but deliberate government policies. In the guise of promoting science and technology, which is erroneously conceptualized as the only engine of development, there has been deliberate undermining of the humanities, which have history as their core.

There is no doubt that the pursuit of science and technology, in the quest to realize Nigeria's development objectives, is desirable and to be welcomed. However, we must realize that development is about human beings who should occupy the central place of all such efforts. For, it is the knowledge of history that makes change comprehensive and meaningful. History is therefore a facilitator of change and development. In the task of development, a people's history cannot be jettisoned. In extending this view, Obaro Ikime further posits that in enabling us to acquire knowledge of who we are and how we have come to be, history fulfils a definite and salient role in the task of national development (Ikime 2006:xvi).

At this juncture, it is pertinent to state our understanding of what the subject matter of history is all about, as we now seek to demonstrate its role in national development. R.V. Daniels defines history in his book *Studying History, How and Why?* as

the memory of human group experience. If it is forgotten or ignored we cease in that measure to be human. Without history we have no knowledge of who we are or how we came to be, like victims of collective amnesia groping in the dark for our identity. It is the events recorded in history that

have generated all the emotions, the values, the ideals, that make life meaningful, that have given men something to live for, struggle over, die for. Historical events have created all the basic human groupings — countries, religions, classes — and all the loyalties that attach these (Daniels 1972:3).

Clearly, history enables us to understand the present through the illumination of the past, and this enables us to plan for the future. In interrogating the purpose of history, J.H. Plumb opined that history seeks to 'deepen understanding about men and society, not for its own sake, but in the hope that a profound awareness will help to mould human attitudes and human action' (Plumb 1971:106). In essence, the understanding that history seeks to deepen is that which will enable us mould human attitudes and action. This includes human attitudes to science, technology and development. In other words, history is central to development.

It remains in this sub-section of our argument to examine the concept of development applicable in this study. Development can be regarded as the structural transformation of a society in such a way that it acquires a higher capacity and capability required by its population. This entails advancement in knowledge, technology, education, institutional adjustments and adaptive ideological orientation. Development can therefore take place only within the context of a people's knowledge of their experience and bringing this to bear as they seek to improve and better their lives.

Interrogating the Role of History in National Development

Interrogating the role of history in national development or, as it is often styled, the role of history in nation-building, has now acquired its own history in Nigeria. The first and second generation of professional academic historians analyzed this subject matter comprehensively. Among those who have dealt severally with this topic are Professor Kenneth Onwuka Dike, a trailblazer in the discipline of African history. Others who have addressed this issue at different fora and times include J.F. Ade-Ajayi, the doyen of the Ibadan School of History, and Professors C.C. Ifemesia, E.A. Ayandele, E.J. Alagoa, Obaro Ikime, Okon Uya, Philip Igbafe, G.O. Olusanya and I.A. Akinjogbin. Given the exhaustive discussion of the issue by these intellectual heavyweights, we will not attempt here a detailed analysis of the role of history in national development. It does, however, deserve a recap.

One major role history has played in Nigerian national life is the achievement of the country's independence. History was a critical weapon for the deconstruction of the psychological colonialist construct that sought to undermine African achievements and thus provide the ideological basis for colonial rule. The challenge of Kenneth Onwuka Dike's era was one in which

Africans were faced with the superiority toga of the Europeans as justification for colonialism. The history that was propagated at the time succeeded in the task of demythologization of European stereotypes about the African past. As noted by Adiele Afigbo, the ability of the historian to rise to the challenge of demystifying colonialism and shattering its basis provided the needed intellectual and psychological succour for the African (Afigbo 1975: 4). Thus for the European, it extricated from him the socio-political and moral basis on which to continue his colonial enterprise in Africa.

The ability to meet this challenge brought historians of the era into prominence and conferred on them the cloak of defenders and heroes of the larger society. They were not merely knowledgeable but also transformed this knowledge into skills for proffering solutions to contemporary problems. This partly explains why historians of that age were found in virtually all walks of life. It must be noted that most of them lived up to expectations and made a success of their call to service. The point to emphasize is that history was a veritable tool in the struggle to secure Nigeria's independence.

After independence new challenges of development and national integration have continued to plague the nation. Unfortunately, the nation is quick to forget the role history played in the past and the continued need to deploy it in combating new challenges. Indeed, the works of a number of historians focused on deepening our understanding of the challenges of the new independent state. However, the incidence of military rule with the concomitant plummeting of our intellectual life as a people deprived us of the benefits of these works. Knowledge, which is the main contribution of history to the development package, consequently began to play a minimal role in our national life. Decisions on several aspects of people's lives were taken without recourse to our past experience. The consequence is the persistent crises that have enveloped and pervade the socio-economic and political spheres of the country.

It is now common to refer to the world that we live in as a knowledge-driven one. As historians, we know that this is the third time in the history of mankind that the role of knowledge has become extremely critical to the development of nations and its peoples. Ma'at in ancient Khemet and the knowledge generated by that civilization represents the first of such knowledge-driven development on a monumental scale. As a consequence of its impact, mankind was transformed in several fundamental ways with far-reaching implications. When it first occurred nearly 3,000 years ago, the philosophical roots of our modern worldview were laid. From the concept of the creation of mankind and one Supreme God, to written language, principles of mathematics, geometry, medicine, chemistry and the codification

of teaching and learning, ancient Khemet or Egypt, as it is more popularly known, gave the world its first knowledge-based civilization (Strudwick 2006:1).

For knowledge to triumph and become useful for the transformation of society it must be rooted in tradition, and order, discipline and patience must prevail. From philosophy we know that the codification of knowledge emerged from rational and logical thought processes, which may have been derived from randomized observation behaviour, experimentation and practice. An iron law of logic is order and discipline. Similarly from pedagogy we know that patience is a *sine qua non*. The concept of learned behaviour is firmly based on patience. This is why time and sequencing exist in any thought and learning flow process. Also, development can only be meaningful if it is based on tradition. Such a development must take into cognizance continuity and change in society. It is when thus anchored that societal equilibrium is maintained even in the face of change.

Let us now relate this specifically to the concept of Ma'at and Sankofa and show how history and development are inextricably linked. The concept of Ma'at dates back over three thousand years when the African peoples of ancient Khemet codified a set of laws and expressed a ubiquitous concept of right from wrong characterized by concepts of truth and a respect for and adherence to a divine order believed to be set forth at the time of the world's creation. This divine order was primarily conceived of as being modeled in various environmental/agricultural and social relationships. In addition to this was the importance and significance of achieving impartiality and social equality. Thus, to the Khemetic mind, Ma'at bound all things together in an indestructible unity: the universe, the natural world, the state and the individual were all seen as parts of the wider order generated by Ma'at. A good example of the principles of Ma'at is what is referred to as the 42 Declarations of Purity or the Negative Confession. Taken from chapter 125 of the *Book of the Dead*, these declarations formed the basis of what became known as the ten commandments 'revealed' to Moses who himself was a high priest of Egypt nearly 2,000 years later (Raymond 1994). They include the following:

1. I have not killed, nor bid anyone kill.
2. I have not committed adultery or rape.
3. I have not avenged myself nor burned with rage.
4. I have not caused terror.
5. I have not assaulted anyone nor caused anyone pain.
6. I have not done any harm to man or to animals.
7. I have not caused the shedding of tears.
8. I have not wronged the people nor bear them any evil intent.

9. I have not stolen nor taken that which does not belong to me.
10. I have not deprived anyone of what is rightfully theirs.
11. I have not borne false witness, nor supported false allegations.
12. I have not lied, nor spoken falsely to the hurt of another.
13. I have not taken God's name in vain.
14. I have not coveted my neighbour's goods.
15. I have remembered and observed the appointed holy days.²

As can be seen from the above, as Africans we had developed a rigorous philosophical platform that bound our individual, social and meta-physical relationship long before the advent of Islam, Christianity or Western civilization.

The concept of *Sankofa* is derived from Adinkra of the Akan people of West Afrika. Sankofa is transliterated in the Akan language as '*se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki*'. Literally translated, it means 'it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot'. *Sankofa* is used today across the pan-African world to promote the idea that African people must *go back to our roots in order to move forward*.³ Visually and symbolically 'Sankofa' is expressed as a mythic bird that flies forwards while looking backwards with an egg (symbolizing the future) in its mouth.⁴

Both concepts are used to buttress the point that, as African peoples, our destiny lies in our understanding and appreciation of our history. No civilization current or past has achieved any significant development based on rejection of its indigenous culture, worldview and history, and wholesale importation of foreign ideas and ways of life. From Ma'at we know that the basic building block of Judaism, and following from this, Christianity and Islam, came from Africa before the Ma'afa or 'great holocaust' visited on the continent by Arabs and Europeans. Sankofa reminds us to go back to our roots and claim what is rightfully ours rather than uncritically accept what the West and Islamic civilizations give to us.

Apart from the fact that everything around us is history, it can hardly be disputed that everything about the emergence of the world is history. By extension, the world is a product of history. History is therefore the source of all that has come to be. Thus, in conceptualizing history, this has to be within the nexus of complexity, as the world is. In this regard what had happened with the emergence of the world, what happened thereafter, what is currently happening and what is likely to happen are all embodiments of history.

History is the mother of all knowledge known to man. There is virtually no field of study that does not encompass history. For example,

- Accountants use the 'historical methods' to balance their books,

- A medical examination cannot proceed without a history of the patient,
- Lawyers rely on 'precedents' to establish a point of law,
- To solve a crime the police must 'investigate' the incident,
- The major difference between an architect and a draughtsman is in the knowledge of 'art history' that the architect possesses.

Until about seventy years ago, political science, government and international relations were taught as diplomatic history. The relationship between history and a nation's development is very well summarized thus:

... history interacts with the nation for the nation is a product of history in the sense of historical circumstance and event and therefore the nation cannot escape from its past. At the same time, the nation is shaped by the effort of history among others, who try to establish the history of the nation, influence its group memory and seek to define its nationality. That is the essence of what binds its people together what constitutes their identity, what makes them a people distinct from other peoples (Ade-Ajayi 2005:3).

Indeed, what historical understanding does essentially for any nation is to place its development predicament within national time perspectives of human evolution. This is the utility value of history. History also helps people not to under-value what they are and over-value what they are not. It provides confidence-building strategies to any nation that is striving to overcome present problems.

Historical Societies in National Development

As has been briefly demonstrated, history is crucial for national development. It remains to examine the role of the historical societies in national development. The role of historical societies no doubt introduces a new twist to the discourse, and to this we now turn. As has been demonstrated earlier, historical societies are structures from which members of the societies promote their interest in historical scholarship. In addition to other aims and objectives, they provide the structures and organization for the continued and conducive plying of the historian's craft in the finest traditions of the discipline. In promoting historical scholarship and consciousness, they are inadvertently agents of development.

For instance, through its annual conferences, the Historical Society of Nigeria gathers its members to focus their intellectual energies on burning national issues that have continued to threaten the Nigerian state and by implication constitute an obstacle to development. The conferences seek to historically deepen understanding of the issues chosen for interrogation. The expectation is that the outcome of the conference will guide policy-makers

who require information on the subject of the conference. In 2006, the HSN's conference theme was *Reflections on Nigeria's Post-Colonial Conflicts: the Search for Historical Depth and Resolution*. Apart from the opportunity offered to investigate in greater details the myriad of conflicts that have characterized Nigeria's postcolonial experience, the crucial resource control conflict in the Niger Delta received considerable attention. In addition to appropriately historicizing the conflict, possible solutions were proffered.

For example, to the charge that the Niger Delta peoples are lazy and unable to take advantage of the new opportunities that arose with the exploration and exploitation of crude oil and gas came a reply that was anchored on the people's history. We are quickly reminded that the Niger Delta peoples were arguably the most enterprising merchants, who dominated the economic scene in the Nigerian geographical area throughout the periods of the slave trade and the palm oil trade. Indeed, Bonny played a leading role during this period. Dike reminds us that at the peak of the slave trade, Bonny had the largest slave market in the world. The merchants of the Niger Delta travelled as far as the Igala country and criss-crossed the entire Nigerian coastline. Surely, their historical experience indicates that their forebears were widely travelled merchants imbued with a substantial dose of business acumen. Professor Alagoa has noted that the commercial activities of the Niger Delta peoples were to significantly shape their socio-political structures. No wonder G.I. Jones refers to the state systems they evolved as trading states. Again we are reminded that the determination of the people in the region to control their resources dates back to the last quarter of the nineteenth century when they resisted European incursion and control of their perceived resource at the time-strategic location. It is for this reason that leaders like Nana Olomu, Jaja of Opobo and Oba Ovarenmwun of Benin were all exiled by their British conqueror.

Again, the communiqué issued at the end of the 2006 conference offered solutions to perceived problems of the Nigerian state that have generated conflict among its people over the years. Concerning the various political crises, the HSN congress recommended the need for a concrete philosophy of governance anchored on the collective history and aspirations of the Nigerian people. It further agreed that in the resolution of these conflicts, a holistic approach predicated on a profound historical understanding of needs should be applied. More importantly, there was a consensus that the virtues of justice, equity and fair play be paramount in the management and resolution of conflicts in Nigeria. The point here is that the HSN, as a juristic person, has with these contributions attempted to deepen our knowledge of the various conflicts the country has experienced since 1960. The expecta-

tion is the hope that this will guide the Nigerian attitude towards conflict resolution and management in its society. For development to thrive, an orderly, safe and peaceful society is a necessity. In helping to achieve this, the society is contributing significantly to national development.

At a supra-national level, historical societies remain very important and relevant to the development of the countries concerned. They often interrogate the common challenges of their various peoples with the aim of proffering solutions to them. A good example is the Association of African Historians, which has kept the flame burning at a continental scale. So far, it has held four major conferences since its establishment in 2001. The theme of the conference held in May 2007 at Addis Ababa was on *Society, State & Identity in African History*. These very issues are central to finding solutions to contemporary African socio-political and economic predicaments. In examining the historical underpinnings of these issues as they affect the African continent, the AAH has contributed to the illumination and understanding of such subject matter. Moreover, in fostering a vigorous interaction and networking among historians of Africa, it is promoting one of the ideals of the African Union, namely, integration.

Conclusion

Part of the subject matter of history is the study of change and continuity in society. Development is necessarily a product of change. However, for it to be relevant and meaningful to society, it must have some elements of continuity, even if only at the level of ideas that have informed such development. Implicitly, development is not possible and cannot be appreciated outside the context of history. History therefore studies development and determines when it has taken place. For, as is now apparent, not to have a sense of history is to remain a child forever. It is a case of not knowing about the past, and so comprehending the present is impossible. This means that there cannot be a platform for planning for the future. It is not possible to talk about development without knowledge of the group experience. For, since development is a process that takes place over time, it falls squarely within the ambit of what historians study. In the sense in which an old man arrogates to himself the achievements of his children, in the same manner can historical societies rightly lay claim to the achievements and role of history in the greater society.

According to our ancestors who founded the great civilizations of Kush, Nubia and Khemet, 'words have power'. That is why African elders do not invoke and make pronouncements on individuals or situations casually. As we confront the challenges of modern civilization and the inherent develop-

ment imperatives, we must look deeper into our traditional cultures to seek out values that are unique and (natural) to us while borrowing systematically from other civilizations in the world. This is how Europe built its great civilization. The Chinese and Indians have also done it. Indian development infuses elements of Hinduism with Western ideals. So also is modern China, which has insisted on development and democracy Chinese- style. Wholesale importation of foreign ideas and values will always create a disconnect that causes the type of problems we see with our polities.

Our nation's leaders cannot pretend that our cultures do not provide deep reservoirs from which we can answer to our developmental challenges. We know this from Ma'at and Sankofa. The difference between a politician and a statesman is in their sense of history. The politician can only work for today, but the statesman has a memory of the past and a vision of tomorrow. He or she uses history as a rear-view mirror, to chart the way forward for his society. Social formations that negate human development can only be temporary as they contradict the iron law of change. In history we remind all that it is possible to use cosmetic surgery to disguise old age. However, such surgery cannot be used to arrest old age. This is why we often insist that history be the judge of all our endeavours.

Notes

1. The first version of this article was given on the invitation of the Bonny Historical Society at the occasion of the celebration of the Tenth Anniversary of the Coronation of His Majesty King Edward Asimini William Dappa Pepple III, Perekule XI the Amanyabo of Grand Bonny Kingdom.
2. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ma'at/References> [accessed 4.2007], for a list of the 42 principles of Ma'at.
3. See <http://www.dubosic.net/sankofaMeaning.html> [accessed 10.6.2007].
4. Ibid.

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