

Research Article

The Place of History in Mitigating National Challenges: The Case of Nigeria

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Abstract: The discourse on nation building is neither new nor is it a recent phenomenon. In fact, it has been the pre-occupation of scholars since Nigeria attained her independence in 1960. This paper is an attempt to emphasize the role of history in enhancing nation building in Nigeria in the face of the present challenges. The paper employs historical methodology in its approach and dwells on secondary sources. The authors are of the view that history, like all other fields in the humanities and social sciences, emphasizes the breaking down of the parapets of negative social segregation, which have been inimical to nation building over the years and has continued to do so. The paper, therefore, posits that, it is the responsibility of history and historians to emphasize the unifying aspects of the Nigerian historical, political, cultural and social experiences as a means of creating an enduring nation building. The paper concludes that a sense of historical consciousness is indispensable in enhancing nation building. It is recommended that since the passion and the interest in studying history is dwindling, the Historical Society of Nigeria (HSN), the Federal Government, State Governments, individuals and corporate bodies should encourage the study of history through the award of scholarship and grants because, history carries in its bosom the recipes for nation building.

Keywords: Nation Building, Historical Consciousness, Social Segregation, Ethnic Nationalities, National Integration.

1.0 Introduction

It is axiomatic to say that variety is the spice of life. If one expects a delicious pot of meal, all the necessary ingredients in the correct recipe must be added for such a goal to be achieved. Similarly, Nigeria's over 250 ethnic groups are its beauty and its strength. To achieve the desired result of nation building, all the variegated ethnic nationalities have a role to play.

Several attempts have been made to enhance nation building over the years, but these have yielded little results. It was in the light of the above that Ikime posits that "it has left Nigeria in search of Nigerians". Nigerians have treated Nigeria as a rented estate in which the citizens live as tenants. They have little or no emotional attachment to the Nigerian state. Their loyalty lies with their ethnic groups or any other groups that appeal to them rather than the Nigerian State. The discourse on ethnic differences and national integration is an indispensable phenomenon in nation building. In fact, it has been the pre-occupation of historians since independence in 1960. This position is explicitly captured by Fatile and Adejuwon when they posited that "any attempt to understand the development of the Nigerian State cannot escape a study of ethnicity as one of the main challenges to the achievement of national integration" (320). Accordingly, in his "Africa between Nationalism

and nationhood: A Political Survey”, Ali Mazrui, without mincing words, described ethnic consciousness as the greatest enemy of African nationhood (24).

Nigeria’s political leaders have huffed, puffed and used ethnicity and political patronage (prebendalism) in political appointments into strategic offices in the country- be it at the local, state or federal levels. These actions have rather, polarized the various ethnic nationalities who see themselves more like strangers or simply like people who share no historical ties thereby widening ethnic differences and making nation building difficult.

The paper does not advocate the blurring of the line of ethnic groupings, rather it calls for the enhancement of nation building. In doing this, the instrumentality of history becomes expedient, because, Nigeria and her ethnic nationalities are products of history. It is understood that the twenty first century has its own challenges and dynamics especially in the face of globalization, hence, new approaches and perspectives are needed to deal with such challenges. For instance, an episodic excerpt in Achebe’s *Arrow of God* emphasized the necessity of adopting divergent approaches in dealing with peculiar challenges when Ezeulu the main character in the novel audaciously declares:

I am like the bird, *Eneke-nti-oba*. When his friends asked him why he was always on the wing, he replied, "men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching." The world is like a mask dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand in one place. (45)

From the above, understandable that the twenty-first century challenges have made historians diversify into such new fields as Peace and Conflict Studies, International Relations, Boundary and Borderland Studies, Strategic Studies, Gender Studies, to mention but a few. This development is aimed at adding wider dimensions to the discipline of history. Obviously, by the comprehensive nature of history, there is no field it cannot pontificate. Lest we deviate from the focus of this paper, the point here is that irrespective of the contemporary challenges confronting Nigeria as a country the place of history in confronting these challenges headlong cannot be overemphasized. This is why the narratives as regards what is the embodiment or totality of history must not be lost. These challenges are historical in nature and we need history to proffer solutions to them.

As historians, it is obvious that it is not our duty to arrest criminals, perform heart surgery, kidney transplants, design highway construction, carry laboratory experiments and so on, but the role of historians is not that simple as it appears. The duty Nigerian historians owe their societies, is to emphasize and re-emphasize the unifying aspects of the Nigerian historical, political, economic and social experience as a means of re-engineering an enduring national consciousness. Professor G. R. Elton in a more encapsulated manner asserts that

We (historians) are here as defenders of reason and thought, of the proper study of evidence, and this is what we are here to teach the world... the historian’s task... is not a question of finding an answer to the future, of planning the future, of settling the future for the world. All he can do is tell them about the past in such a way that they can think about past, present and future (Cited in Afigbo 6).

The importance of history cannot be neglected among people who are really interested in national integration and development. The role history and historians play in the society can be likened to the pragmatic analogy by Achebe in his *Anthills of the Savannah* thus:

It is also like this (for what is true comes in different robes) ... Long before sunrise in the planting or harvesting season; at that time when sleep binds us with a sweetness more than honey itself the bush-fowl will suddenly startle the farmer with her scream: o-o-i! o-o-i! o-o-i! in the stillness and chill of the grassland. I ask you, does the farmer jump up at once with heavy eyes and prepare for the fields or does he scream back to the bush-fowl: - shut up! Who told you the time? You have never hoed a cassava ridge in your life nor planted one seed of millet - No! If he is a farmer who means to prosper he will not challenge the bush-fowl; he will not dispute her battle-cry; he will get up and obey (123).

From the above excerpt, it is analogical that historians, like the bush fowl, are the oracles that call the nation, her leaders and citizens to the clarion of nation building. No country progresses when her ethnic nationalities see themselves as rivals and strange bedfellows with no sense of historical ties. Nigeria's challenges which range from ethnicity, unemployment, poverty and corruption to uneven distribution of the country's commonwealth have threatened nation building.

Ethnic identity and consciousness create inter-ethnic rivalry among different ethnic groups in Nigeria and also pose a challenge to the quest for nation building. It must be stated here that ethnic groupings in itself is not injurious to nation building. It becomes inimical to nation building when it is used as an instrument of exploitation, marginalization and deprivation.

2.0 Explanation of Concepts

The concepts used in this study include "history" and "nation building". Therefore, to understand the central theme of the paper, it is necessary that they are explained.

2.1 The Concept of History

Like most disciplines and concepts in the humanities the definition of history is amoebic. It is amoebic in the sense that it can be explained from many standpoints and has no generally accepted definition. But, in all dimensions and perspectives, the definitions of history are inextricably linked together when juxtaposed. This was why the English historian, Edward Hallet Carr in his *What is History* defines it as "..., an unending dialogue between the present and the past" (5).

According to Ochulor *et al*, "History is not just an attempt to narrate an arrangement of happenings. The historian in all his efforts is not merely telling us that something has happened but he goes further to tell us the causes and the meaning of such occurrences" (37). Simply put, "the human mind is not content with simply knowing that certain things happened; it wants to know the cause and the significance of such occurrences" (Ochulor *et al*, 37). The principle that there is no event without a cause is not only a property of physics, it is also relevant in history.

Robert has explicitly captured what history is when he stated:

History is the memory of human group experience. If it is forgotten or ignored, we cease in that measure to be human. Thus, without history, we have no knowledge of who we are or how we came to be, like victim of collective amnesia groping in the dark for our identity. It is the events recorded in history that generate all emotions, the values, the ideals that make life meaningful, that give men something to live for, struggled over and die for (6).

For a better understanding of the focus of this paper, it is expedient to talk of Nigerian history. As indicated earlier, Nigeria's emergence and her ethnic nationalities are a product of

history and to discuss nation building, history is that 'bush fowl' that reminds the citizens on the role they play.

In fact, Nigeria could be likened to a family that has over 250 members. In this family, no single person is superior to the other. The idea or feeling of superiority is borne out of pure illusion. The designation majority or minority, north or south, Hausa-Fulani, Igbo, Yoruba, Tiv, Efik, Ibibio, Gwari, Bekwarra, Ijaw, Urhobo, Igala, Jukun, Kuteb, and many others does not relegate any one or render the other insignificant.

Nigerian history and her ethnic nationalities cannot be lumped together and discussed. This is because each of these ethnic nationalities is unique in its own way. Hence, there is the need to discuss them separately for a better understanding. It is in the light of this position that Ajor and Odey define Nigerian history as:

... the study of the history of the various ethnic groups that belong to it, their origins, migrations, settlements, cultures and cosmologies, economic, social and political institutions that distinguish them from those of other groups prior to, and after colonial rule to the contemporary period (55).

As stated earlier, the emergence of Nigeria as a nation in 1914 and her over 250 ethnic nationalities is a product of historical evolution. Hence, history becomes an indispensable tool for managing ethnic differences and enhancing nation building.

Any attempt to relegate historical solutions to the current challenges of nation building to the background will not only frustrate the efforts of historians past and present but also make the mission of nation building impossible.

2.2 Nation Building

Understanding the concept of nation building requires a brief definition of a nation. To this end, according to Hroch, a nation refers to a Large social group integrated by a combination of objective relationships (economic, political, linguistic, cultural, religious, geographic, historical), and their subjective reflection in collective consciousness (Cited by Mohammed 8).

It could also be seen as "an expression of 'large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future' (9).

The above definitions support the ideas of Kenan and Handler that the nation is "a 'daily plebiscite' and a 'continuous' entity, which constitutes a broad framework of interaction stretching beyond certain specific sub-national identities" (Cited in Mohammed 9). Four common denominators are deducible from these definitions:

- i) First the blending of diverse linguistic, cultural and religious groups into broader entities is one of the most dominant features in the formation of nations. He argued that multi-ethnicity is the rule rather than the exception, for there are virtually few nations if any (perhaps with the possible exception of Somalia) constituted by a single ethnic group.
- ii) The second dominant denominator hinges on the first reason; nations have a historical past however tenuous that past may be-shared myths, culture, language, or a common colonial experience.

- iii) Thirdly, there is always a territory or ancestral land serving as a 'marker' distinguishing one nation from the others.
- iv) Fourth and finally, some level of communication, industrial development and progress help to hasten the blending process (Mohammed 8).

3.0 The Role of History in Enhancing Nation Building

It was Obaro Ikime who once stated that we do not study the past merely for its own sake. History for history sake is history for nothing sake. We study the past because it has a relevance to the present (207). What then is the role of history in managing Nigeria's ethnic differences? As stated earlier, it has been made explicit that Nigeria and her ethnic groups are products of history. This is vividly captured by Erim O. Erim when he asserted that:

Our modern collectivity called Nigeria is the result of a 'slow' historical process which mirrors the historical experiences of the diverse ethnic groups, which in a myriad of inter connected events, have contributed to the emergence of a unique Nigerian culture. In other words, modern Nigeria is an amalgam of the various pre-colonial states and past civilizations. The same conclusion is true of other great nations of the world (*Calabar Historical Journal* 2).

Similarly, Achebe's literary piece, *Anthills of the Savannah* vividly mirrors the primacy of history when he pontificates that:

The sounding of the battle-drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards--each is important in its own way. I tell you there is not one of them we could do without. But if you ask me which of them takes the eagle-feather I will say boldly: the story....'So why do I say that the story is chief among his fellows? The same reason I think that our people sometimes will give the name Nkolika to their daughters-- Recalling-Is-Greatest. Why? Because it is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story, not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us. It is the thing that makes us different from cattle; it is the mark on the face that sets one people apart from their neighbours.' (123).

Nations or nation-states are an important part of the modern society. A journey back into history will reveal that what is now Nigeria used to be divided into empires and kingdoms especially in centralized societies. In the modern period, however, nations or nation-states have replaced empires as the basic unit of human political organization from the treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

As mentioned earlier, the description of the Nigerian State as a mistake of 1914 is not only faulty but also a misnomer. It is also a lack of historical consciousness or simply our inability to consult historical documents that most often lead to such hasty claims. It was on the basis of refuting the claim that the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 was a mistake that Akinwunmi remarked thus:

It is a historical fact that the British created Nigeria. But with the nature of interaction between the various groups, Nigeria though not necessary in the present form, would still have emerged. The ambition of the Sokoto Jihadists was to dip the Quran into the Ocean. The

project was still on until the colonial government aborted it. In the south west, the Ibadan state had emerged as the most powerful state in the region. The state foiled the further territorial ambition of the Caliphate in Yoruba land in the 1840 Osogbo war. Ibadan leaders were in the process of establishing a political hegemony in the west when colonialism was imposed. In the east, the Arochukwu priests had established through peaceful means, their influence beyond Igboland. The influence was such that the colonial government was forced to use military forces to destroy it (35).

The above except as apt as it is dismissed the assertion that the emergence of Nigeria in 1914 was a mistake. Perhaps, it is safe to say that the emergence of Nigeria as a modern state is a product of historical accident and not natural and because it is a historical accident, national integration and nation building is always a work in progress. Nations are built by men and women with vision and resolve. Nation-building is therefore the product of conscious statecraft, not happenstance. This position was further corroborated by Mohammed J. Kuna:

For the formation of political communities far from being natural, is a process of construction, and invention. All nations are contingent, that is to say, they are constructed, invented, or imagined, through historical accidents, consciously through wars or through the formation of myths and meta-narratives (9).

Viewed from this perspective therefore when people refer to Nigeria as an accident derogatorily, they could not have been more explicitly accurate in their positions. Nations are by their very nature accidents of history. In fact, history has revealed that from pre-colonial period to colonial and to contemporary period, Nigerians have always interacted among themselves. No group was an island to itself. Falola *et al* captured this when they maintain that:

No Nigerian group can be treated in isolation of the others. It was neither possible nor realistic for any community to ignore its neighbours. In fact, the economic and political survival of a community depended on the relationship, whether friendly or hostile, which it had with its neighbours. This could take the form of trade, diplomatic ties, management of trade routes, boundaries and water resources and wars, among others (122).

It is an obvious fact that nations neither drop from the sky nor are conceived in the womb and put to birth through the natural process like new born babies, rather, through conscious, painstaking, purposive activities nations are constructed and the principles for peaceful coexistence and integration are set.

However, the inability of Nigerians to integrate should not be blamed on amalgamation. By assuming that Nigeria is an accident, we sometimes aim to conclude erroneously that our scenario is peculiar. Similarly, it equally forecloses every attempt aimed at achieving national integration. As stated above, national integration and nation-building are always a work-in-progress.

4.0 Dangers of Ignoring History

History is so indispensable that no nation, individual or group of people can ignore or relegate it to the background. There are enormous consequences when a group of people or a nation pretends as if their past has no role to play in their present and their future. These consequences are obvious and assume monstrous dimensions in Nigeria today. From the failure of leadership, to underdevelopment, intolerance and inability to integrate can easily be

attributed as Nigeria's inability to learn from its history. For those who think that history does not matter, Achebe has this to say:

So the arrogant fool who sits astride the story as though it were a bowl of foo-foo set before him by his wife understands little about the world. The story will roll him into a ball, dip him in the soup and swallow him first. I tell you he is like the puppy who swings himself around and farts into a blazing fire with the aim to put it out. Can he? No, the story is everlasting.... Like fire, when it is not blazing, it is smouldering under its own ashes or sleeping and resting inside its flint-house. (Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* 124)

It is a known fact that when a country and its citizens treat a discipline like history as an appendage, history in return will leave them to their own peril. In fact, in a panoramic exposition on Nigeria's challenges, Ade Ajayi maintains that:

Perhaps, one reason why there is so much violence, aggression and instability in our day to day life is that we have so little consciousness of a time perspective. We act and react as if there is only today, no yesterday, no tomorrow. We seem to care so little about the past... not surprisingly, we hardly ever consider what kind of a future we are building for our children and our children's children. We lack statesmen with any sense of history.... The corruption in our society goes beyond those who steal public funds and pervert justice, it includes those who forget, as we say, "the horsemen of yesterdays", the individual and values that sustained us in the past, and applaud only those who for the moment, and by whatever dubious means, have access to power or to money enough to buy attention. The nation suffers which has no sense of history. Its values remain superficial and ephemeral unless imbued with a deep sense of continuity... such a nation cannot achieve a sense of purpose or direction or stability, and without them, the future is bleak (1).

The above excerpt explains why Nigeria and indeed African states are "stagnant". The overriding struggle is to gain access to power, hold on to it, loot and bastardize the state's resources for their pecuniary gains or at best to plunder these resources without any commitment to building a viable, sustainable and enduring nation. And when it does not favour them, they appeal to ethnic sentiment and the masses suffer for it.

5.0 Conclusion

This paper notes that Nigeria's diversity can be a tool for enhancing nation building if only her citizens are made to be aware of the role of history in achieving this. From the exposition above, it is obvious that in history the ideals and value system of nation building are embedded. Ethnicity can be an indispensable tool for ethnic integration if the elite and political leaders avoid its usage in a negative way. This is because all Nigeria's ethnic nationalities are unique in terms of endowment, culture and resources. Therefore, when these groups come together to contribute their unique quality to the polity for the benefit of all, there is bound to be progress in nation building. An enduring sense of history is the only string that would bind the diverse cultural, ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria and Africa together. It is the surest way of eliminating ethnic and religious boundaries that have been erected over the years which have led to countless loss of lives and property and hindered nation building.

It is expedient that Nigerians cast their minds back as a people and reflect on the journey they have embarked upon so far as a nation. Has the country made any meaningful progress? Do Nigerians have favourite beauty spots? Do they have any ties that bind them together? Where

have things really gone wrong? Why is there so much disconnect and disaffection among the ethnic nationalities that make up Nigeria? History provides and furnishes Nigeria's citizens with answers to these and many more other unanswered questions. History has been variously described as a milestone, an oracle and a compass that guides and reminds nations and her citizens of the extent of the journey or stagnancy and progress or retardation they have embarked upon so far, as well as the mistakes, disappointments and vacuum they have created in the past and the pitfalls to avoid.

Finally, the Historical Society of Nigeria, the Federal Government, individuals and corporate bodies need to encourage the study of history from the primary school to the tertiary levels through study grants and scholarship since the ingredients of nation building are embedded in history and are handed down from generation to generation.

Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest of any kind.

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