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THE IMPACT OF HISTORY AS A TOOL FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined the various contributions of history to the development of the society at large. Drawing from the experiences of many countries, including the United States of America, the paper argues that those countries were able to pull through partly because of the lessons of history. The paper critically examines the influence of history on National Development through politics, economics, religion, socio-cultural life of people and education. This is because; history helps us to acquire experience with which to solve our problems by comparing what happened in the past with what is happening in the present. The paper used qualitative descriptive approach and content analysis for describing the impact of history as a tool for national development. The paper contends that a proper understanding of the past of a society is indispensable for comprehending the present and planning the future. The paper also recommends the study of history at all levels of the Nigerian school system.

Keywords: Impact, History, Tool, National Development, Nigeria.

Introduction

History has been defined as the investigation, analysis, interpretation and the records of those aspects of the past of mankind, available either in memory or on material, which have meaning and relevance to society. A definition of history sees it as a continuous process of interpretation between the present and the past. Some scholars also see history as a body of facts about the past activities of man, to be studied, understood and explained. In the opinion of modern writers like D.I. Ajaegbo, history is the investigation, interpretation and record of all those aspects of the past of mankind. History is not only a study of the past, but also a field of inquiry. One can understand everything in this world, about individuals or society, through history. The national history is a national teacher in the sense that one may learn much from record of the past in order to improve for the future. (Agbodike, 2006:2-3).

On the other hand, development is a phenomenon in human society that is dynamic and multi-dimensional. It affects the people, human values and attitudes as well as human institutions. Development should not be seen or interpreted only in the context of such economic or political indicators as high per capita income, strong industrial and commercial base, increased agricultural production, high level of literacy, political stability, and growth, urbanization rate, family structure, youth socialization and education. However, development should be seen as multi-dimensional in scope, and when seen from this perspective, it becomes a process of improvement in all sectors of human endeavors and in the general welfare of the society. Primarily, it becomes a human issue concerned with the ability of the people to realize their inherent potentials and effectively cope with the changing circumstances of their lives. By all implications, such development is man-centred and people-oriented (Ajaegbo, 1996:29).

The contributions of history to national development are widely recognized, though often ignored. A proper understanding of the past of a society is indispensable for comprehending the present and planning the future. Every human society, at every stage of existence and development, has history. History is the memory of society, the repository of a people's consciousness. According to Ajaegbo, (1996:29) history is "the summarized experience of society as experience is the condensed history of the individual. Any nation that ignores her past not only does so at its own risk but also imposes serious constraints on its growth and development".

This section therefore discusses the impacts of history on national development, in the area of politics, economics, religion, socio-cultural life of the people and education. History helps us to acquire experience with which to solve our problems by comparing what happened in the past with what is happening in the present (Agbodike, 2006:29).

History and National Development

One important way history contributes to national development is through its beneficial admonition to enable us to learn from our past mistakes and avoid making similar mistakes in future. The experience we have gained from the political history of Nigeria cannot be quantified. For example, the first military coup in Nigeria in 1966 caused subsequent coups, resulting in a long period of military rule in Nigeria. Without that first military coup, the military would perhaps never have interfered with Nigerian politics. Sometimes in the past, politicians allegedly invited the military to intervene in the political process. For example, the Nigerian former President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo wanted a third-term rule for himself. If this unconstitutional act had taken place, perhaps it would have caused a military intervention. But the National Assembly frustrated that desire. In some African countries, there are alleged cases of civil war due to the selfishness of the leaders who do not want to step down from power. Such countries include the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), Liberia, Sierra Leone, Chad, Sudan and Cote d'voire. The Nigerian Civil War of 1967-1970, for example teaches us great lessons because over two million Nigerians allegedly lost their lives. According to Agbodike (2006), the military leaders met at Aburi in Ghana and reached certain decisions on the political future of Nigeria. When the Federal Government of Nigeria issued Decree No. 8 which embodied the Aburi accord, Col. Emeka Ojukwu rejected it on ground that the provisions differed from what they have agreed on in Aburi (Agbodike, 200631-32).

Shortly after, Gowon replaced Decree No. 8 and assumed the power of the Supreme Military Council. He created twelve states in the country and took steps to declare a state of emergency throughout Nigeria. On their part, the government and people of Eastern Nigeria saw these actions as a show of bad faith. And on May 30th 1967, on the mandate of the leaders of the Eastern Region, Ojukwu declared an independent Sovereign Republic of Biafra (Agbodike, 2006:160). Following the declaration of independence by the Eastern Region, Gowon on July 5th 1967, declared a war on the newly created Republic of Biafra. He called it "the war to keep Nigeria one" The war, at first, began as a "police action" but in September 1967, it turned into a total war against Biafra. Here history teaches us and our leaders to think well before taking any action.

The annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential election result drove the nation to the edge of a precipice. Numerous other tragic mistakes abound. History has helped to create in us the awareness that these mistakes constitute a cog in the wheel of national development. We are quite conscious of the fact that the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967-1970) took us some steps backwards. The remote and immediate causes of the civil war are still pellucid in our memory. What the nation, therefore, needs is to use this historical knowledge to eliminate or at least reduce, to the barest minimum, the impediments to our national life so that a truly free democratic and progressive Nigeria will emerge (Agbodike, 2006:110).

Leadership

The issue of military intervention in Nigerian politics and governance has constituted a matter of serious concern and wide discourse among Nigerians. This assertion is justifiable when it is realized that 29 out of 50 years of Nigeria's existence as an independent nation (1966 - 2010) were dominated by military rule. Several reasons have been given by various Nigerian military regimes for overthrowing civilian governments and themselves. Let us take General Babangida's regime as an example. One of the greatest problems that faced the administration was how to revive the growth of an economy that had been depressed for several years. The administration quickly identified the causes of the depression in the economy and traced them to issues among which were the continued increases in the population and the dependence of the country on imports for both consumer goods and raw materials for industries and the wide gap between the rich and the poor. To address these problems, the government began to put in place a series of measures (Agbodike, 2006:40-41). As a result of the problems inherited from the past regimes, General Babangida's regime went back to history. A case study was what happened in the United States of America in 1933 during the regime of President Franklin D. Rooseveit. When Roosevelt assumed office, most of the nation's banks were closed; industrial production was down to 56 per cent of the 1929 level; 13,000 or more persons were unemployed and farmers were desperate.

The Congressional leaders were so shaken that for the time being they were ready to follow Roosevelt's recommendations. In his inauguration, Roosevelt promised prompt and decisive action and somehow conveyed to the nation some of his own unshakable self-confidence when he said, "this great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper". For the moment, people of all political views were Roosevelt's allies and he acted swiftly to obtain enactment of the most sweeping peace time legislative programme in the United States history (Ajaegbo, 1996:3). Meanwhile, in his hundred days in office, through a broad array of measures, Roosevelt first sought quick recovery and then reform of the mal-functioning in the economic system which he thought had caused the collapse. He tried to give aid to each of the main interest groups in the U.S. economy. He also directed his legislative programme toward a broad constituency. In March, 1933, Roosevelt redeemed one of his important campaign pledges by introducing a programme of drastic government economy. He soon sent to Congress a series of messages and draft bills proposing the programme that comprised the early New Deal. He first obtained from Congress Federal funds for the relief of human suffering. Congress established the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) which granted funds to state relief agencies for direct relief. It also established a Civil Conservation Corps (C.C.C) which at its peak employed 500,000 young men in reforestation and flood control work; it was a favorite project of Roosevelt and remained popular throughout his regime. The new Deal mortgage relief aided other millions of persons both farmers and home

owners. The key loan agency of the new deal was the previously established Reconstruction Finance Corporation (R.F.C) (Chukwu, 2007:107).

On assumption of office as Nigeria's military president in 1985, Babangida borrowed the idea of the New Deal and introduced the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). Among the elements of SAP included the Second-Tier Foreign Exchange Market (SFEM) or (FEM) which commenced operation on 29th September, 1986. The administration introduced many other measures which included salary cuts, privatization/commercialization of public enterprises, promotion of industrial production and diversification, establishment of the National Directorate of Employment and a special public works programme as well as the People's Bank. The Directorate of Food, Roads and Rural Infrastructures (DFRRI) and the Better Life for Rural Women programme were equally established. These programmes have become a fact of history, which went a long way in alleviating the sufferings of the people. So we can now understand the importance of history in national development (Chukwu 2007:108-109).
If Babangida's SAP policy failed, as it was believed to have done, it was not because of bad planning - but in the implementation. In fact, it has been argued that it failed because the leaders and the implementers of the programme were unpatriotic and dishonest in the implementation of the tenets. Similar policies in the past had also failed, not because they were badly framed but because the political leaders lacked self-discipline and a sense of history. We therefore call on our leaders and the entire society to go back to history to find solutions to national and even individual problems (Agbodike, 2006:89).

Economics

Nigeria, like other developing countries, can learn from historical experiences of developed nations to achieve rapid industrial, economic, social and political progress. Our present economic predicament is not novel to human societies. The political leaders, in particular, to be successful, must be historically alive and alert. The main economic resources in Nigeria were normally agricultural products. Among them were palm kernel, oil, cotton, groundnut, cocoa, which were sold to trading firms for export to Europe where they were used in the factories. It is important to underline that in most cases, European trading companies operating in Nigeria during the colonial period were known to have worked in concert for the purpose of stifling competition, maximizing profits and reducing the prices paid to Nigerian for their agricultural produce for many years. With the conquest of Nigeria by Britain, a colonial system was set up to develop a colonial economy, favourable to Britain. During this period, railway lines, sea ports, roads, rubber, and cocoa plantations were developed. Later agitation for Nigeria's independence and a new kind of development that would benefit Nigerians was initiated. Subsequently, self-government came between 1953 and 1959 and brought with it the rapid development in education and greater control of economic resources by Nigerians. With political independence in 1960, Nigeria had rapid economic development. Between 1960 and 1975, many universities and other higher institutions were built (Chukwu, 2007:110). Economic development was interrupted by the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970). At the end of the war in 1970, the oil boom occurred, resulting in more money for faster economic development. The result of this was money in the nation's kit.

Religion

We have two major religions in the world namely, Islam and Christianity. There are other belief systems. Unfortunately, religious conflicts often arise resulting in violence among the

adherents of these religions because they misunderstand and suspect one another. The violence usually results in loss of lives and property. History teaches us to put a stop to such violence in order to have national development. For example, in the Zangon Kataf religious crises, in Zangon Kataf Local Government Area of Kaduna State in 1989 and 2001, many lives and property were lost. These crises occurred as a result of preaching by the rival religious groups and by insulting one another. Here, history teaches us to stop religious violence and crises in our country because without peace there will be no development in the nation (Mani, 1956:165).

Religious crisis is not only between the Muslims and Christians but also between Muslims and Muslims. A good example is the Maitatsine violence in Kano in 1980. Maitatsine, led a fanatical group of Muslims. His followers were mainly drawn from the youth and rural peasants who were dispossessed of their land in the process of urbanization in the country and subjected to all sorts of socio-economic and political dislocations, deprivations and marginalization. The movement was said to be authoritarian in nature. In the course of the revolts, however, Maitatsine was killed and several arrests were made and the movement was forced to go underground.

The contribution of history here is that it draws attention to the result of religious violence and unbridled inter-religious conflicts. History has also shown us that deprived rural population can be mobilized to cause grievous harm to civil society. Because these people are uneducated, they can easily be indoctrinated. History, therefore, teaches us to give the masses good education and mobilize them for the good of the society and their own good (Anyanwu, 1993:44).

Social life

The classic example of social relationship in African history is the extended family system which is entrenched in the life pattern of the people. An African can keep close relations in his house, feed and clothe them. In other parts of the world, this extended family system is foreign. For example, in India, any person who has more than four children is expected to bear the responsibility of taking care of the additional number of children without government assistance. Similarly, in China, where the government takes care of only two children, extra number of children constitutes additional burden. These countries know from history that if they allow their citizens to produce children as they like, their economy will not be able to maintain the large population. History also teaches us that the Jews and Arabs were children of Abraham. What makes them different is language and religion. To solve the problems of the Middle East, those involved should go back to history to learn what happened in the past to help them understand the present. To continue the war of annihilation there may not bring solution to the matter (Edward, 1973:83).

Culture

One classic example of the integrative role of culture, which is language, is worth discussing, Language is a very important component of culture and has always been a strong instrument for group cohesion and unity. Historically, it has largely facilitated all aspects of inter group relations in Nigeria from the pre-European era to the present (Ajaegbo, 1971:83).

The role of history in creating cultural awareness which is indispensable to national development is also widely recognized. Culture is defined as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, moral, law, custom and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society" (Agbodike, 2006:9). It is the summative way of life of a people expressed in language, art, architecture, myth, folk and songs, food, marriage, birth, death and rituals. Culture is, therefore, a veritable symbol of national identity, pride and experience. European propaganda that Africans had no history or culture has conclusively been proved to be lies. Africa had history and culture and a system of education transmitted from generation to generation through oral tradition.

Through history we learn many things about the world because, the historian is the guardian of the cultural heritage of the society. Through the study of the material records of the past, the historian recreates the past, fills the gap in our knowledge of the people and their past and creates a better appreciation of the present. It is important to add that our cultural heritage can also generate economic prosperity. In most advanced countries, museums are big tourist industries which yield a lot of revenue. Tourism in Nigeria can equally be improved or expanded through the development of our museums and the economic wealth so generated will play a vital role in the task of national development. (Agbodike, 2006:9).

Education

The term "education" is used to connote a process, a product, a discipline, and an institution. Education is crucial in any type of society for the preservation of the lives of its members and the maintenance of the social structure. Under certain circumstance, education also promotes social change. The greater portion of education is informal, being acquired by the young from the example and behavior of the elders in the society under normal circumstance. (Obasi, 2000:8).

In Africa, after independence, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, African history provided the background for policies aimed at removing the vestiges of colonialism and racism on the continent. However, in the last two decades of the 20th century, people had begun to question the relevance of African history to the development of the African continent, especially in the area of acquisition of technology. The question is: Can history help trigger development in Africa and get her out of the present state of underdevelopment? (Anyanwu, 1993:50).

When the British left Nigeria, at independence, they bequeathed to us an educational system which was characterized by the production of more arts than science students and graduates and little emphasis on science, technical and trade (or vocational) education. This type of educational system was undoubtedly unsuitable for the production of the right men and women needed in the critical fields to foster national growth and development. Therefore, with the knowledge of the colonial education curriculum, a conference came up with a recommendation for aggressive scientific and technological education. The policy on education, therefore, began to emphasis the need for scientific and technological education. The successive government in Nigeria also began to put into practice various measures and programmes to effects the science and technology policy (Chukwu, 2007:207).

Moreover, national integration could be facilitated through the use of the educational system to foster national identity and awareness among the school children and the youth. This is

because it is easier to transform the youth whose minds are flexible and therefore more susceptible to change. History has also shown that in order to make education play a key role in national reconstruction and development, our formal education school curriculum should be diversified and made more functional than is currently the case, and geared towards solving the problems of our contemporary society. To this end, vocational and science/technology education should be given a priority position in our educational system to ensure education for work and employment and education for self-reliance (Agbodike, 2006:5).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have attempted to show the relationship between history and national development and that history can contribute to or impact on the development of the society. Through history we can correct our past mistakes and develop the present and future.

There is no doubt from the foregoing analysis that history can and indeed, has served as the fundamental ingredient for the formation of national identity, growth, pride and power. Knowledge of the past constitutes the basic building blocks for the making of the future. This is to say that the past is tied to the present in the organic relationship that forbids the examination of one without the other. Because of these, one could appreciate the value of history in our society. The leaders of the nationalist movement were serious about nation-building and the important role of history in nation building, hence they needed little or no persuasion to encourage the study of history in our schools and to fund projects of African and national history like the Benin Historical Research Scheme, Northern Research Scheme and Eastern Research Scheme.

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