

## The Challenges of Conducting Historical Research in Nigeria in the 21st Century: Further Remarks

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### Abstract

*An analytical and sound historical write up is founded on the quality and to a large extent quantity of information gathered by the researching Historian. In view of this, a historian goes the extra mile to gather available and necessary information for a chosen topic. It has however been discovered that Historians encounter many challenges in the pursuit of his or her academic endeavours which if not checked, may hamper or discourage future endeavours. This paper is aimed at divulging some of the major challenges (with particular reference to the 21st Century Nigerian Society) the historian faces in the course of his work. The tool for information gathering here was mainly the primary sources of data collection which include Oral interviews, Group Discussions and personal observations. However, relevant information was also gathered from books and journals to add support to the discussion. The findings of the work show that notwithstanding efforts of serious minded historians to beat these challenges (which includes: influence of western inadequate funding, civilization, religious influence and apathy for history as an academic discipline), by continuous cosset with Historical research. The study in the final analysis examines the fact that if nothing is done by government and the academic environment to check these trends, the study and writing of history in Nigeria will soon collapse.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Foreign Policy, Nigeria, Politics of Human Right, Gender Discrimination.

## Introduction

The facts are really not at all like fish in the fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast ocean and what the Historian catches will depend partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tactic he chooses to use. These two factors being of course determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch...<sup>1</sup>

The above assertion shows that the act of history writing through historical research is a very serious business that requires not only the discovery or formation of topic(s), but that which has both historical and current significance to knowledge and society. Also, such topic must have sufficient information to back it writing up because validity and authenticity of historical sources have to be established in their own peculiar way and these involve the rigorous and double process of internal and external criticism that the work will undergo to be accepted as a historical piece of work. In view of the aforementioned, historical research can only be making sense when laid down criteria are followed. In Nigeria particularly in this 21st century, certain factors tend to militate against the historian while pursuing of historical research. The study sets to unveil these ugly phenomena and bring to bear how they contribute in limiting or hindering the work of the Nigerian historians.

## Conceptualization of Historical Research

Research is a careful and diligent search, a tedious inquiry or examination especially critical and exhaustive investigation or experimentation. Having for its aim and interpretation the vision of accepted conclusions, theories or laws.<sup>2</sup> However, a historical research is a systematic inquiry that describes, explains, predicts and controls the observed phenomenon. It gives the researcher the opportunity to interact with primary sources of information in order to collect authentic information. It involves search for new knowledge, investigate possible causes and proffer practical solutions to issues and problems in the society. A historical research therefore is a systematic inquiry into the past event(s) or activities of man and society by the historian with the aim of unveiling the time, place and cause(s) of an event(s) and how these event(s) affect or impact the present day and its implication for the future.

For a research to be regarded as historical, it must meet the same criteria and possibly follow the same procedure as other historical researches. Thus, historical research like other form

of research starts with the Identification of the Problem for investigation<sup>3</sup>. This followed by collection of data, organization of materials and synthesizes information and writing/documentation of information<sup>4</sup>. Among these mentioned procedures, it is important to note that information gathering or data collection (as popularly referred to), is the most tedious and important jobs. Because the quantity and quality of data gathered from the field determine the quality and impact of the research on the society. Pursuant to this objective, most historical researches are confined not to a single source or discipline, but rather multiple of sources or what is referred to in the academic parlance as interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary method. For instance, historical research uses data generated from other disciplines where collaboration is involved. It has assumed the position of the ultimate in historical and writing having come through deluges of advocacy since the 1960s.<sup>5</sup>

Affirming the role of interdisciplinary approach to historical research, E. J. Alagoa submits:

It is now generally agreed that the earlier history of most African societies can best be reconstructed through the combine use of insights from Archaeology, Linguistic, Anthropology, and other discipline. These other disciplines include Geography, the Environmental, Social, Biology, Medical and Natural Science as well as Economic.<sup>6</sup>

Besides the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to historical research, oral tradition has also find its acceptance as a major source of historical research especially within the African context. Other source includes the recent Internet development.

### **Challenges of Historical Research**

Given the arrays of sources as mentioned above, one would submit that gathering information for a historical research will be an easy ride. However, emerging trend seems to blur this achievement as historical research particularly in Nigeria. It has fastidiously bowing to some inherent factors that are inhibiting its development and progress as analyzed herewith.

**Dearth/Difficulty of Data Gathering:** The diligence with which the Historian goes about facts finding in the course of historical research is beyond mere few information gathering. This is so because according to E. H. Carr, Facts do not speak for themselves. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he or she (sic) who decides what fact to give the floor and

in what context.<sup>7</sup> What this implies is that for the Historian to actually make a genuine and acceptable historical research, he must as a matter of fact peruses carefully through all the facts available to him and discretionally decide which one (out of the many at his disposal) best meet his requirements. To effectively achieve this feat, the Historian needs as to avail his or herself with as much information that can be gathered on that particular topic. However, as the day goes by, the Nigerian Historian is faced with the bare truth of dearth of information. This situation is more pronounced particularly in the Archives and museums in the country. While other developed/developing nations are being overwhelmed with the volume of documents been produced and preserved by History conscious Individuals and Institutions and even Government, thus saddling Archivist with the task of sifting through the mass and determining what should or should not be preserved,<sup>8</sup> what is attainable in Nigeria according to Aduyi is “ Total lack of and disrespect for records through willful destruction; such as misuse, pilfering and stealing of critical and sensitive documents and unprofessional handling of Historical(sic) documents”.<sup>9</sup> This submission of Aduyi is also supported by this writer whose personal experience at the National Archives in Enugu State and other Libraries in the country prompted the motive for this study. In most of the libraries visited, the situation was the same. The books (were available) are either too old pages breaking off as a result of wears and tears, or particular section, pages or chapter pilfered away by unmindful person.

Oral Tradition: closely related to the above is the nose diving nature of Oral tradition. The importance of Oral tradition in the reconstruction of Africa and Nigeria history is no longer in doubt and cannot be over-emphasized. However discovery made by this work shows that this viable aspect of African and Nigerian historical source is fast going into extinction. Migration, Modernization and Search for Employment among others have contributed largely in uprooting and disconnecting people from their ancestral homes. This disconnect most often make people to forget the history of their homes. For instance, it is common phenomenon in recent times to a family of a particular ethnic group who can hardly speak their language talk more of knowing or remembering their history. In an attempt to get the rationale for this development, an informant Ujoh said “ I know am Idoma from Ogbadibo Local Government Area of Benue State but can hardly speak the language because I and my siblings were born brought in Lagos and we have lived all our lives there. The only time we come home briefly is during festivities and such time is too short to capture and understand the language properly not to talk of knowing the history of the place which our parents themselves cannot really recount.”<sup>10</sup> The rapid increase of these “Modern Nigerian” families in Nigeria added to the high death rate of the rural elders as a result of harsh

socio-economic condition in the country. This constitutes serious threat to the continuous existence of oral tradition as historical source material.

Besides Oral Tradition, another historical source (though relatively new), that is problematic in Nigeria is the Internet source. In this technologically globalized world where most required information is just a click away as a result of the Internet Services, Nigeria and indeed most African nations are still lagging behind in tapping the full benefit of this new technology. Apart from the epileptic power situation in Nigeria which makes access to the Internet a big challenge for those who cannot afford alternative power source. Also, Nigerians have been discovered to be the highest payers for internet services world over as the charged tariff of Nigeria is quite higher than that of compared to other nations of the world thus making Internet services none affordable to many Nigerian<sup>11</sup>. Added to these is the fact that most of information about Nigeria uploaded into the net are not in-depth in their analysis and even limited in quantity as most information about the nation gathered through oral tradition are yet to be uploaded into the internet probably as a result of the reasons just adduced.

Apart from being an academic discipline taught mostly in the University, the age long debate as to the relevance of History to societal development as propagated by Valerie<sup>12</sup> and other antagonists of History has not abated. If anything, the antagonism (notwithstanding the recent decision to include History in the teaching curriculum of all Secondary School by the Federal government) is growing by the day as it is common even among students of history. This disdain for the discipline of history and the success of many past administrations in relegating the discipline of History to the background has contributed in making History very unpopular. The impact of this to historical research is: first, the lack of historicity in most historical research particularly at the undergraduate level. Due to lack of interest in the discipline by many undergraduate students most of them tend to write and make analysis of issues that would have been an exclusive preserve of their peers in the Social Sciences. Even though this is possible and encouraged, due to the inter/multidisciplinary approach of research available for the Historian, what is actually worrisome, is the haphazard ways these topics are analyzed without any form of the natural historicity therein.

Secondly, because of the unpopular nature of history in the society as a result of the aforementioned reasons, most students and researchers of History are looked down upon in the course of carrying out their research. According to this informant “ When you go out to ask respondent questions that will aid you in your research and you introduce yourself as a student of history or a historian, they people/person will just look at you and ask: of all the courses in the

university, it is history you see to read? What is there in history apart from storytelling and what is new about history that you want to bother me with?"<sup>13</sup> Such societal rejection most times demoralizes researchers and in turn affects the output of the research. Besides, most Nigerians in this time are more concerned about survival rather than historical knowledge, hence, their inability to answer simple historical questions put to them by Historians particularly during Oral Interviews.

Thirdly, is the rapid and consistent Brain Drain Syndrome: Another major challenge to historical research in contemporary Nigeria is the mass movement or planned movement of experienced Historians out of the shores of Nigeria? This movement which is mostly connected to the unfriendly posture of Nigeria's socio-economic and political spheres to all and sundry brings to bear the pitiable situation most Historians face in pursuit of historical research with no experienced Historian to guide/direct them. Because such persons have migrated or planning to migrate to either America or Europe where their profession are appreciated and better remunerated. This situation has led to leaving many historical researches and data half-done/undone or at most in the hands of jejune/armature Historians.

Insufficient Funds: One major constraint to all academic research in Nigeria is the paucity of funds available to both individuals and research organizations. O. O. Isaka submits:

Fiscal resources needed to fund and sustain research endeavours are merged and where allocations for such are made available, they are often misappropriated. As a result, Libraries and Workshops are ill equipped for meaningful research. Even for demonstration of practical teaching, the Laboratories are inadequate".<sup>14</sup>

The meaning of this is that a lot of issues such as misuse and misappropriations of funds meant for researches have been ongoing in the public sector and nothing genuinely has been done to stop the act hence, funds for researches generally are diverted into personal use leaving researches and researchers in comatose. The case of individual/independent researcher is even more pathetic. Many independent historians have at one time or the other abandoned research projects due to lack of funds, while those who could manage, limit the scope of such projects in order to beat the fiscal challenge involved. The implication of this is that either a viable research work that would have contributed to knowledge and societal development are completely

discarded or their findings are stage managed, drawing general conclusions that are not reflective of realities on ground in such environment.

Closely related to this, is the none adoption/implementation of research findings and recommendations. Either out of insensitivity on the part of policy makers in Nigeria of the importance of academic researches generally (and historical research in particular), most academic research findings are not given the proper attention not to talk more of implementation of its recommendations. Commenting on this scenario, O. A. Oluka laments:

One Major factor affecting research development and output in all field of human endeavour is poor reward system for researchers. It has been said that some major breakthrough researches have been swept under the carpet or at best poorly received for policy inputs.<sup>15</sup>

Given this discouraging fact added to the ones mentioned above, most historical researchers get discouraged thus sending wrong signals to young and aspiring researcher. This situation has also made historical researchers not to engage in extensive and consistent progressive research. Even when it is done, it is aimed at gaining promotions in a paid job in the educational institutions or at best for attaining the terminal certificate of PhD. The older professors unfortunately seem overwhelmed by constraints of teaching or are inundated with administrative chores that allow them very little time for research.

### **What is to be done?**

The argument puts forward by some scholars and policy makers that history deals with the past and a kind of past that has neither bearing nor relevance on the present in contemporary Nigerian society and therefore should be discarded is to me, just a mere display of ignorance about the subject matter of history. This is because history does not only concern itself with the past, but goes further to show how lessons from this past can help shape the present and prepare for the future using the “WHERE, HOW WHEN and WHY” critical and unique historical research method. Affirming this attribute of history to society, Henry Kissinger said:

For societies exist in time rather than space. A state achieves identity only through the consciousness of a common history. This is the only experience nations have, their only possibility of learning from them. History is memory of state<sup>16</sup>.

Kissinger's submission reaffirms Carr's position when he defined history as "an unending dialogue between the past and the present"<sup>17</sup>. Going by these submissions, it can be strongly advocated that history and historical research are important and relevant discipline that must be embraced by any society in Nigeria where the subject is (until recently) is facing challenge of relevance and extinction. On this note, the following suggestions are made to revive history and historical research in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century and possibly beyond.

First and foremost, the recent directive by the Federal Government for the reintroduction of History as a course in the teaching curriculum of all Primary and Secondary Schools in Nigeria should be monitored to its full implementation, as this will go a long way in inculcating historical consciousness in the minds of the youths earlier in life. The situation where students get to know about history as a discipline and the history of their societies only when they are compelled by situation to pick history as a course in the university, is one of the reasons for lack of interest and jaded attitude towards historical research and the many none historical write ups we see today as displaced by students and lecturers respectively. Secondly, as stated in the findings of this study, most of the books and other historical documents in both the archives and libraries are either being pilfered or stolen away. Therefore it is the study's humble submission that to curtail further loss of vital information, these books can be photocopied and re-photocopied and preserved in different shelves only to be brought out when the current ones wear out. Also, legal action should be taken against anybody caught pilfering or outright stealing of any research document(s) to serve as deterrent to those contemplating such act.

Thirdly, action should be taken to revive the dwindling cultural practices of the Nigerian people. This is because, if the African in the words of Dike "see his past in the language he speaks today, in his music, his dance, his arts, his religion and his institutions"<sup>18</sup>. The current trend where African languages, dance, music among others are fastidiously being substituted for western ideals spell doom for Nigeria and African Historiography. This is because if nothing is done to impede this trend, oral tradition on which Africans pride themselves as major source for Africa's historiography will go into extinction. On this note, there should be a drastic drive towards the revival of good African cultural practices that hold our history for posterity sake. Also, there is need for provision of sufficient research funds by government, corporate bodies and interest individuals to encourage research institutions to carry out researches effectively. Finally, efforts should be geared towards meting out punitive measures to any individual or group caught in the act of plagiarism and pirating so as to allow for proper acknowledgement of information sources to serve as morale booster for originator(s).

## **Conclusion**

The fact that history covers all aspects of human life/existence and therefore relevant to human society can no longer be over emphasized. To this end, the dwindling historical practices and challenges faced in carrying out historical research in contemporary Nigerian society, added to the relegation of the discipline of History to the background by past administrations has served as a major thrust to the nation building challenge of Nigeria since independence in 1960. If Nigeria and indeed Africa must grow, history and historical research must be given its proper place in the scheme of things as only then will the Unity and Progress that defined our Coat of Arm be made our companion.

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