11-1-2018

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Recommended Citation

Adewale, Onagbesan (2018) "Historiography: Challenges and the Pertinence of History," *Young African Leaders Journal of Development*: Vol. 2 , Article 13.

DOI: 10.32727/24.2018.38

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/yaljod/vol2/iss1/13>

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HISTORIOGRAPHY: CHALLENGES AND THE PERTINENCE OF HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

The concept of historiography has been defined, explained and analyzed by various scholars, as its meaning and scope is varying. Also, the concept of historiography within historical scholarship has been faced by differing challenges in the writing and reconstruction of Africa's historical past, hence, making the discourse on the pertinence of History as a concept and discipline, a subject of bickering. This paper aims to concisely explain the concept of Historiography in respect to the views of different scholars, stressing the various challenges associated with the reconstruction of Africa's past events, as well as, establishing the level of importance of the study of History to the entirety of an individual, society, state, continent and the world.

WHAT IS HISTORIOGRAPHY?

The concept of historiography has been defined, explained and analyzed by various scholars, as its meaning and scope is varying. However, the underlying explanation of the concept is; ***the art of writing history as well as; the body of literature existing on historical issues.***

Historiography is precisely '***the history of history***'. Typically, within historical scholarship, there is a focal attention on events and facts, thereby analyzing why they happened, the causes and consequences. Historiography however, focuses on the adopted methodology of historians and instead of tracking events, tracks the development of historical thought over time. It is philosophical to ask; '***what theoretical approaches have differing historians taken?***', '***how have these views changed over time and why?***' and '***why do they think that?***'

According to **Richard T. Vaan**, he expressed the concept of historiography as; *the writing of history, especially the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particular details from the authentic materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those details into a narrative that stands the test of critical examination.* It also refers to *the theory and history of historical writing.*

The concept of historiography relates to the *art of writing history*. It is also a process of ascertaining, recounting and reconstructing the course of history through the establishment of the knowledge of the past events. It is concerned with discovery of facts, analysis of historical sources, and reconstruction of the past, as well as, critical reflection of historical patterns. The focus is the evolution of historical writing. Specifically, the historiographer comments on the works of other historians, rather than, the actual historical events. The historians are concerned with ***what they wrote, why they wrote and how they wrote.***

Expressing what historiography precisely deals with; Erim stated that ***historiography is a discipline dealing with the methods of writing history and the techniques of the historical research and documentation.*** In the same vein, E.A. Afigbo submitted that, ***historiography is the science of writing history.*** In the assertion of Dike and Ajayi, they opined that;

“It is the discovery and critical assessments of historical sources, reconstruction and description of the past on the basis of facts available and to a large extent involved to allocate, conscientize the society or even assist in influencing aspects of contemporary public opinion, action or policy and reflection on the trends and patterns of historical writings”.

Historically, the discipline of historiography has experienced evolution over the century. In the Greco-Roman period, the view of history was cyclical. In the Christian era, it was linear in nature. In the 17th century, which was the age of the Erudites, it was in the form of diary of events. In the 18th century which was the age of interpreters, it was in form of interpretation. Since the 19th century, it has been in the form of a critique. Before the emergence of Leopold Von Ranke, history was not in form of an academic discipline. He led the campaign to write history differently and to spate history from religion, philosophy and literature. He was focused on stressing the point of stating what actually happened. His methodology was the collection of data, sieving of data and analysis as well as citing the source, hence the pretext for objectivity. He also stressed the need for writing papers, setting up history seminar, scientific analysis and the nature of controversy in history. He wrote a law in the 19th century which is currently been of great use in modern history. In any case, it is equally important to note that historiography is very holistic and critical in nature.

THE CHALLENGES IN THE RECONSTRUCTION OF AFRICAN HISTORY

It is important to express the vastness and diversity of African history. Hence, the process of writing and the reconstruction of African history will definitely pose diversity, thereby, exposing varying issues, shortcomings and challenges in the course of writing and reconstruction of African past. The writing of African history as simply put, *African historiography* is faced with several problems and issues. It should however be noted that, many of these challenges are contemporarily weightless, considering the differing efforts amassed by African historians and scholars to reconstruct the various historical events that took place within the continent, thereby establishing a valid arguments to justify the authenticity and legitimacy of African historical facts and events. It is crucial to concisely explain these challenges in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, of every challenge facing historians in the writing of African history is the erroneous view about African history postulated by many Europeans historians and scholars. They opined that, Africa has no history worthy of relevance and that the activities of the Europeans (traders, missionaries, explorers, administrators, etc.) summed the entirety of African history. Some of the European scholars noted for this assertion were; Hugh Trevor Rooper, Herbert Spencer, Harry Johnston, Endre Sik, Frederick Hegel. These biases and prejudices emerged due to the fact that, early historians were mainly Whites, hence, the reason for Euro-centric postulations. The resultant effect of this situation was the emergence of new African historiography in the 1950s and 1960s by prominent African historians and scholars such as; E.A Afigbo, J.F. Ade Ajayi, E.J. Alagoa.

Secondly, the writing of African history was also faced with the problem of the effective and efficient utilization of oral sources such as; oral tradition, oral evidence as there is disagreement on their reliability. Most of the time, transmission of the oral sources is done through story-telling, fables, myth, legend, song, popular history and proverbs by the elders. Knowing fully well that, Africa has a meagre writing culture, with infinitesimal exceptions in some parts of Africa where the Arabs influenced before the advent of the Europeans. A consideration of the unavailability and inaccessibility of written sources made oral sources the major source from which the reconstruction of African past can be achieved. However, the use of oral sources in historical reconstruction is embattled with difficulties of which the problem of chronology is outstanding. Logically, in traditional African history, accurate chronology was hardly taken seriously as sole emphasis was on specific events. Even when there are specific references to years, generations and periods, they may relate to 'structural' and not chronological time. Noted that early African communities lacked the culture of proper documentation of events from time to time, however, in the course of writing and reconstruction of African past, science has helped through archaeological process in ensuring accuracy in the dating of historical events, specifically through a specialized approach called, Radio-carbon dating and stratification. The pertinence of archaeology is anchored on the fact that, it supplement the very meagre evidence provided through oral sources, reconstruct the pre-history period of Africa inadequately covered. Again, frailty of human memory makes it difficult to chronicle events in specific detail for more than four generations. Distortion is yet another limitation of oral tradition (as with written sources too). The historian encounters this problem when two societies give an account of the same events, thus the given evidence might conflict, or

even contradict at many points (**Osarhieme, 1993**). Irrespective of the fact that oral sources are faced with several problems such as; bias and distortions, giving indefinite and uncertain answers, inability to give chronology, superficiality and subject to change in the face of several social attitudes, the authenticity and influential utility of the oral sources have been affirmed by several scholars such as; J.F. Ade Ajayi, E.J. Alagoa, Robert Smith, J.A. Atanda, K.O. Dike.

Thirdly, the writing of African history is faced with the belief that changes in the history of Africa are anchored on external motivation. This was massively expressed by many European scholars, as they criticized African achievements, as feats beyond the abilities and capabilities of Africans. Some of these accomplishments range from the remarkable and outstanding architectural structures in places such as, Zimbabwe, Meroe and other parts of Africa. The assertion is called, Hamitic theories or hypothesis. They further criticized that Africa was structured into units that were conquered and civilized, thereby proving Africa as a passive beneficiary of historical changes. They also ascertained that, history only begins when men take to writing, as expressed by A.P. Newton, thereby equating written sources with history, as the absence of such written sources meant no history. However, these Hamitic claims were disproved by African Historians and scholars in their writings, such as; Omer-Cooper, Dike, Alagoa and Ade Ajayi.

Closely related to the aforementioned is the phenomenon of explanation within the context of historical scholarship. Based on this, two dominant schools exist on the concept of explanation in historical scholarship. Some scholars are of the opinion that history is focally concerned with the analytical description of particular events of the past and therefore, historians must search for general laws which might govern those events. Scholars from another school of thought argue that it is the duty of the historian to logically explain events and situations. The scholars who believe in general laws contend that general laws is a crucial instrument of historical research and that they even entail the entirety of the social sciences in contradiction to the natural sciences. The logical historians believe that it is not desirable to adopt any general law in history. Vividly, history is different from the natural sciences which are concerned with abstractions; and seeks to describe and explain what actually happened in the past. Therefore, since laws govern classes of things and historical events are unique, it is not possible for the historian to explain his subject matter with the application of laws. Pertinent to the problem of explanation in history is the status of accidents in history. The centrality here concerns the degree of pertinence to be accorded accidents in explaining the historical process. Certainly, accidents do occur in the course of history.

In addendum, the problem of objectivity has been a constant phenomenon in the course of historical scholarship. The controversy over objectivity centres mainly on what constitutes objectivity and the possibility of objectivity in historical scholarship. Herodotus, Leopold Von Ranke, Jeremy White, R.S. Smith, Robin Law, J.A. Atanda, J.F. Ade Ajayi and E. H. Carr who are scholars of the positivists' school have postulated the desirability and possibility of objectivity in historical reconstruction, though in varying extent. On the other hand however, scholars such as, William Dray, Scott Walsh, Sir Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, R.G. Collingwood, Leroy Johnson, and others within the Orthodox Marxists School submitted that objectivity in history is impossible (**Alao, 2006; Dray, 1966**). An empirical review of literatures on historical objectivity truly express that, absolute objectivity in history is simply an illusion. It must be noted that both European and African Scholars are prone to subjectivity. It should be stated that there are differing limitations to achieving objectivity in the course of historical scholarship. First, the emergence of new evidences which limits the possibility of absolute objectivity in history. Second, the nature of the historical past in itself makes historical objectivity certainly difficult. Historical events happen and vanish, leaving fragmentary evidences about the past. Unfortunately for the historian, the events of the past cannot be entirely reproduced and verified compared to the way the physicist reproduces and verifies his specimen. Third, selection of certain materials among many by the historian constitutes subjectivity in itself. Fourth, personal biases and prejudices on the part of the historian also pose limitation against objectivity in history. Lastly, conflicting theories of historical interpretation (e.g. empiricism, Marxism, Post-Modernism, Feminism, etc) make objectivity extremely difficult in historical scholarship. The contemporary historian is faced with numerous problems, technical and non-technical. First, he has to contend with the massive amount of data at his disposal. This problem is the expanded by the considerable attention from journalists which often results in an over-abundance of documentation.

Second, it is the problem of perspective. Third, the challenge of getting reliable evidence, and sometimes the undue influence of the government are critical issues in contemporary historical research. Fourth, difficulty arising from handling sensitive issues which may amount to domestic or international tensions. Lastly, so crucial is the fact of perennial danger that the historian may address his subject with his mind preconditioned by his personal idiosyncrasies since he might directly or indirectly be involved in the issues at hand (Ogen, 2006).

THE PERTINENCE OF HISTORY

“Those who have employed the study of history, as they ought, for their instruction, for the regulation of their private manners, and the management of public affairs, must agree with me that it is the most pleasant school of wisdom”

.....John Dryden

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”

.....George Santayana

There is no doubt that history is useful, as it contributes its own quota to the general advancement of the society, hence, its pertinence as both; account of the past and as a discipline. Many people tend to have regard for other disciplines, at the expense of questioning the pertinence of History. Many scholars have expressed their opinions as regard the rate of disregard for History, as compared to the respect and support given to science. Arthur Marwick, Prof. Michael Omolewa, B.O. Oloruntimehin, and many other historians have expressed their reflections as regard the usefulness of history.

“When history was no longer an instrument of the Russian Communist Party, the party was doomed to failure.”

.....David Remnick

“A nation that forgets its past has no future”

.....Winston Churchill

Having considered the aforementioned assertions, Arthur Marwick (1986) was emphatic of the utility of history when he remarked that; *the necessity for history has two aspects. History is functional in the sense of meeting the need which society has to know itself and to understand its relationship with the past and with other societies and cultures. It is also poetic in the sense that there is inborn in almost every individual a curiosity and sense of wonder about the past.* It is also because of the immense contributions of history to the progress of mankind that all shades of people make reference to history.

Peter Stearns in his 1998 work, published by the American Historical Association titled '**Why Study History?**' submitted that;

People live in the present. They plan for and worry about the future. History, however, is the study of the past. Given all the demands that press in from living in the present and anticipating what is yet to come, why bother with what has been? Given all the desirable and available branches of knowledge, why insist—as most American [and, in this case, British] educational programs do—on a good bit of history? And why urge many students to study even more history than they are required to?

In the words of Carl Sagan, he opined; '**You have to know the past to understand the present**'. It should be noted that the usefulness of history cannot be over-emphasized. A crucial justification for the usefulness of history, can be attributed to the needs of the society, it strives to accomplish. However, the justifications for the usefulness of History can be expressed in the following.

Firstly, history helps to give a clear understanding of the past in order to direct the present and prepare the society for the future. This means that, the society needs to learn from its successes and failures of the past, so as to correct the present and plan for the future. In effect, the usefulness of history is underlined in the fact that, no society can do without its history. Basically, history is said to be the study of society in time perspective. It is generally believed that, a society that abandons its history is just gone for good and thereby slips into obscurity. This was well articulated in the words of Robert Smith, ***“.....there lies the possibility of extracting from the past, lessons for the present and future, and therefore a means of helping humanity in the understanding and handling of its problems.....”***

Secondly, history is useful in the sense that, it has been a principal medium for the transmission of culture. Noted that, Africans transmit culture through institutions and ceremonies as well as, court historians or chroniclers who are carefully trained to transmit historical facts in the palace. More so, it is important to note that history helps to promote understanding among the diverse elements of the society. It also promotes respect for the institutions and practices of such a society. It is stated that, through history, the society is able to explain how it conceives of the world in which the society or community is an integral part. The society is able to explain origins of differing components, basis of different laws and customs, as well as, the differing nature of customs, traditions, religion and politics.

Furthermore, history is useful in the integration of other disciplines. It has been expressed that other disciplines can be understood through history. Hence, the reason for the necessity to study the history of various disciplines to have an in-depth understanding of the discipline. The general usefulness is immense, as several people make references to history. This is in line with the moralizing role of history in the course of public administration, as it rings the awareness that posterity will definitely put their actions on trials.

In addition, the usefulness of history can be attributed to the society, irrespective of its level of advancement. This is underlined in the fact that, reference is made to historical judgments. It is used in making comparative analysis by historians, political scientists and scholars. It should be emphasized that, knowledge can only be gotten through the knowledge of history. History provides coming generations analysis of the achievements of great men which tend to inspire them, thereby learning from the lessons of history. Hence, the reason for Arthur Marwick, Becon and the Italian Historian, Cicero emphasis on the importance of history.

Also, the usefulness is expressed in the fact that, history is an instrument capable of creating and maintaining a distinctive identity. It provides a national ideology for the country. History is used to promote national integration and national consciousness. It acts as a practical guide to the problems of human society and politics.

Peter Stearns in his work summarized the usefulness of history. He opined that ***history helps to understand people and societies; understand change and evolution of societies; contribute to moral understanding; provides identity; provides essentiality for good citizenship; develop the world of works.***

Harlan Davidson in his 2000 work concluded on the utility of history. He submitted that ***history provides a sense of our own identity; helps to better understand the present; corrective for misleading analogies and lessons of the past; enable understanding of the tendencies of humankind, social institution and aspects of the human condition; helps to develop tolerance and open-mindedness; provides the basic background for many other discipline; entertains; and teaches many critical skills.***

The usefulness of history at every discourse and fora is such that it is far above infinitesimal. A legitimate justification for the usefulness of history can be explained in its impact on general development of the society. Hence, the causative of General Ibrahim Babangida conferment of the 1986 Nigerian National Merit Award on Professor J.F. Ade Ajayi. It should

be concluded that, *there is no way by which the individual or society can escape from history, as life is closely associated with history. History is said to be a living and dynamic reality.*

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