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History, the Historian and His Work: Issues, Challenges and Prospects

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ABSTRACT

The age-old intellectual and 'pedestrian' controversy over the meaning and societal significance of history is bound to persist for yet a long time. However, the strong reliance on historical information, particularly in the Third World countries in recent times underscores the acceptance of history as reality and an outcome of objective research. Yet, the writing of history is beset with a legion of problems. Significantly, these problems to a large extent are domiciled in the nature of history itself. This paper is a critical discourse of the major challenges the historian of today encounters in his task of reconstructing the past. The study examines the nature of history as it relates to the problems of historical research, and concludes that the continued relevance of history and historians can only be guaranteed if the latter consistently and diligently address these challenges through appropriate measures.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a bird-eye account of the challenges that confront the historian in the onerous task of reconstructing the past, as well as the prospects of surmounting them. True, there is in existence an enormous body of literature on the nature of history, and the work of the historian. However, this current effort is intended to provide useful and refreshing insights for our understanding of the major obstacles confronting the historian in his task, and the possible solutions. For sake of clarity and ease of analysis, this essay is divided into the following sub-sections:

1. Introduction
2. Nature of History: Some Conceptual Clarifications
3. Challenges to Historical Research
4. Possible Solutions
5. Conclusion.

THE NATURE OF HISTORY: SOME CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

The term history has become an ubiquitous word conceptualized differently by various scholars. For instance, the Traditional conception of history epitomized by historians like Herodotus (Father of History), his great successor Thucydides, Livy and Tacitus, the greatest of the Roman historians, viewed history as any written narrative of events (Osokoya, 1996). This definition is however inadequate and unacceptable in view of contemporary realities. First, the definition did not acknowledge the development of history overtime. Second, it did not recognize the division of the discipline into such fields as political, social, economic, military intellectual, constitutional and educational history. Third, the conception of history as mere narration of events is now archaic because history has metamorphosed from mere description of events into critical and analytical interpretation of events (Osokoya, 1996).

Arthur Marwick on his own part, provided a tripartite definition of history. First, he defined history as "the entire human past as it actually happened", second, as "man's attempt to describe and interpret the past" and third, as "a systematic study of the past" (Marwick 1970). However, it must be noted that in contemporary times, history as a field of knowledge encompasses not only past events but also their consequences. In addition, not all events of the past capture the interest of the historian, rather important historical events with consequences are usually preferred. It is in this light that Walsh defines history as "a reconstruction of the past which is both intelligent and intelligible" (Walsh, 1967). In a similar vein, Geoffrey Barraclough defines history as "the attempt

to discover on the basis of fragmentary evidence the significant things about the past”, noting that “the history we read, though based on facts, is strictly speaking not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgements” (Barraclough, 1955). For Edward Carr, history is “a continuous process of interaction between the present and the past”, affirming that, interpretation is the lifeblood of history (Carr, 1961).

The point in all these is that there is yet to be unanimity regarding the exact meaning of history. However, it is possible and desirable to identify certain features which may be described as defining characteristics of history. This is important because history, is the product of historical research, and therefore the nature of history and of historical research are symbiotic.

One of the basic characteristics of history is in its humanistic nature (Ajetunmobi, 2005). History concerns human actions in the past. It involves other actions that emanate from human society which can be perceived by ordinary human senses and powers. Hence, actions or events attributed to the gods or spirits are not to be regarded as history. Since history relies on evidence and the evidences from believers in spirits, gods and goddesses are mythical, speculative, extraordinary, unscientific and illogical, they are considered outside the action of man.

History is fragmentary by nature. It focuses on aspects or parts of an event, but not the whole event. No matter the efforts of an historian, it is impossible for him to capture everything about his choice of study. Availability of evidence, its reliability and consistency, available time and the objectives of the study shape his selection and utilization of sources and evidence. As A I Akinjogbin notes, history is an organized critical study of such past activities of human beings as had produced significant effects on subsequent course of events (Adeniran, 2002).

History terminates in the present. As Hegel posits, history cannot talk of the future because nothing has happened in the future in question. Thus, the future to the historian is not an object of knowledge but of hopes, aspirations and fears, elements which are not history.

History is dynamic, in a sense. History is always in a state of flux because it deals with a state of continuous change (Barraclough, 1975). Human society which is the primary focus of history involves the cyclical manifestations of existence.

Evidence is the pillar of historical research. This is because without evidence there will be no historical interpretation. The submission of the historian is not a product of speculation or imagination. History is not fabricated and thus cannot be manufactured. Instead, evidence is the rubric upon which history stands.

Finally, history is an outcome of diligent research. History is critical in the selection, interpretation and analysis of available data. It is these features of history that have made it look science (Ajetunmobi, 2005). These aspects of history imply that what is presented as history is a product of honest inquiry and not that of the historian’s sensibilities or imagination.

CHALLENGES TO HISTORICAL RESEARCH

The major challenges to historical research revolve around the problems of sources, knowledge, explanation, objectivity, choice of subject, and the peculiar problems of contemporary history.

Sources

The problem of sources is a serious challenge to the historian in the task of reconstructing the past. The quality of a historical study is determined largely by the manner in which sources are collected and used. Sources are basic in historical research and they are many and varied. The manner in which sources are recovered, examined, and preserved are important parts of historical research. The importance of recovery, examination and preservation lies in the fact that they provide a basis for the assessment and interpretation of sources in order to achieve the objective of historical research (Osarhieme, 1993). While sources must be reliable and valid, it is important to strive at understanding the origins of the sources because no matter how meticulous the process of recovery, interpretation and presentation might be the reconstruction of the past goes beyond mere summing up of reliable information available in the sources.

A major problem facing the historian in his work is that he has no direct access to the past, since events happen and disappear. What is then left of the past are traces or fragments of information which may be in the form of primary, secondary or tertiary sources. The situation is even more daunting for the historian engaged in the reconstruction of the history of pre-literate peoples. The

absence of written sources upon which conventional history rests presents its own problems. The deficiencies of the written, contemporary sources have made historians of traditional societies to seek data from alternative sources, particularly oral tradition mainly in the form of myth, legend, song, and popular history. However, the use of oral sources in historical reconstruction is replete with difficulties of which the problem of chronology is outstanding. As an illustration, in traditional history of Africa, accurate chronology was hardly taken seriously as 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 (Osarhieme, 1993). 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). Distortion in oral tradition occurs either due to alteration of traditions or adaptation to provide the basis for the elevation of a particular society above another. 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).

CHOICE OF SUBJECT

The choice of topic for research is another major challenge facing the historian. Historians are challenged by the complexity of the world, and thus seek to use their knowledge of the past to help solve the problems of the present. The questions that can confront the historian are endless, and serious historians thus face the challenge of choosing a viable topic. They find it undesirable to dissipate energy pursuing the kind of question to which history has no answer, such as, "what is the purpose of the universe?" or "who is the smartest person in the world?". Nor do they want to struggle to achieve the solution to a problem that is not of real importance. Historical investigation can probably reveal who wore the first pair of pants with a zipper, but that piece of information might not be worth knowing (historically significant). Indeed, the main difficulty facing the historian is not eliminating unanswerable or unimportant questions but choosing the important ones (Benjamin, 2004). A historian's choice of study is determined by personal values, concerns of those who support his work, the nature of the age in which he lives, or by a combination of all these. Significantly, the ways in which these influences operate are complex, and the historian himself is often unaware of them.

After choosing his topic the historian still has to contend with many other questions. For example, does historical evidence on the subject exist?, and if yes, where can it be found? Consider someone who is interested in studying gypsy music from medieval Europe, which music was never written down or mentioned in historical accounts of the Middle Ages, then little or nothing could be found about this subject through historical research (Benjamin, 2004). Even if records exist on a particular subject, the historian may be unaware of them or unable to locate them perhaps because such records are in an unfamiliar language or are in the possession of individuals or governments that deny researchers access to them. Surely, locating evidence is, sometimes, the historian's albatross.

PROBLEM OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

The problem of historical knowledge is one of the core issues which arise in the writing of history. The problems of knowledge in history are basically epistemological. To be sure, epistemology or the theory of knowledge is that branch of philosophy which is concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge, its presuppositions and basis, and the general reliability of claim to knowledge. A major challenge for the historian is how to deal with his work in view of the problems surrounding historical knowledge.

Historical problems about knowledge in history manifest in sources, selection, memory or eye-witness account and written records – i.e the problem of fake documents like the forgery of Hitler's diary (Osarhieme, 1993). However, the knowledge of what happened in the past must be certain and unambiguous – that is, the standard yardstick for measuring knowledge is that it must be demonstrable and scientific. But how does the historian go about obtaining his knowledge of the events that happened in the deep past, especially when he has no direct access to the past. Surely,

the past has vanished and what is only left are fragmentary evidences which are in written or unwritten form.

PROBLEM OF EXPLANATION

Closely related to the problem of historical knowledge is the issue of explanation in history. Two dominant positions exist on the problem of explanation in history. Some writers are of the opinion that history is concerned with the description of particular events of the past and therefore, historians have to search for general laws which might govern those events. Another school of thought argues that it is the duty of the historian to explain events and situations. The writers who believe in general laws contend that general laws form an indispensable instrument of historical research and that they even constitute the common basis of various procedures characteristic of the social sciences in contradiction to the natural sciences. A good number of historians believe that it is not desirable to adopt any general law in history. Clearly, history is different from the natural sciences which are concerned with abstractions. History seeks to describe and explain what actually happened in the past. Therefore, since laws govern classes or types of things and since historical events are unique, it is not possible for the historian to explain his subject matter via governing laws (Osarhieme, 1993)

Germane to the problem of explanation in history is the status of accidents in history. The central issue here concerns the degree of importance to be accorded accidents in explaining the historical process. Certainly, accidents do occur in the course of history. They are, however not historically significant because they are not amenable to rational explanation. (Yakubu, 2006). Thus, the historian in the course of writing history faces the challenge of how to distinguish between rationally explicable causes and accidental causes. This distinction is important because rationally explicable causes can be applied to other countries, other periods, and other conditions, thereby facilitating fruitful generalizations leading to lessons; whereas accidental causes due to their uniqueness cannot be generalized, thereby foreclosing the possibility of drawing conclusions from them.

OBJECTIVITY

The problem of objectivity has been a recurrent decimal in historical scholarship. The controversy over objectivity centres mainly around what constitutes objectivity and whether objectivity in historical scholarship is possible or not. Herodotus, Leopold Von Ranke, Jeremy White, R.S. Smith, Robin Law, J.A. Atanda, J.F. Ade Ajayi and E. H. Carr, (Carr, 1988) who constitute the positivists schools have propagated the desirability and possibility of objectivity in historical reconstruction, though in varying degrees. On the other hand however, scholars like William Dray, Scott Walsh, Sir Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, R.G. Collingwood, Leroy Johnson, and others in the Orthodox Marxists School see objectivity in history as impossible (Alao, 2006; Dray, 1966).

A review of literatures on historical objectivity clearly shows that absolute objectivity in history is illusory. It must be noted that both European and African Scholars are prone to subjectivity. Indeed, quite a number of limitations stand in the way of objectivity in history. First, the possibility of new evidences emerging limit the chances of absolute objectivity in history. Second, the nature of the historical past in itself makes historical objectivity difficult. Historical events happen and vanish. What is left are fragmentary evidences about the past. Unfortunately for the historian, the events of the past cannot be wholly reproduced and verified 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 is also a limitation against historical objectivity. Fifth, partisanship by the historian also limits the prospects of objectivity in historical research. Lastly, conflicting theories of historical interpretation (e.g. empiricism, Marxism, Post-Modernism, Feminism, etc) make historical objectivity difficult. However, the ever present challenge is for the historian, inspite of these litany of impediments, to desire and pursue objectivity as much as possible.

Problems of Contemporary Historical Reconstruction

While the historian encounters some common problems in researching all kinds of history, it would appear that certain problems are peculiar to contemporary historical reconstruction. As Bernard

Krikler and Walter Laquer put it, contemporary history is essentially concerned with events which form the direct basis for decisions on problems of public importance in the present day or in the immediate future, as distinct from those which provide only a general historical background or have no concern with modern problems at all (Krickler & Laquer, 1972).

The contemporary historian faces numerous problems, technical and non-technical. First, he has to contend with a vast amount of data at his disposal. This problem is compounded by the considerable attention from journalists which often results in an overabundance of documentation (Ogen, 2006). Second, there is the problem of perspective. Third, the problem of getting reliable evidence, and sometimes the undue influence of the government are obstacles in contemporary historical research. Fourth, is the difficulty that arises from handling sensitive issues that are capable of sparking domestic or international tensions. Finally, a major problem is the perennial danger that the historian will approach his subject with his mind preconditioned by his personal idiosyncrasies since he is either directly or indirectly involved in the current issues he is researching (Ogen, 2006).

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

As daunting as the problems of historical reconstruction are, they are by no means insurmountable. The historian can tackle the problems associated with historical sources by paying necessary attention to the techniques in dealing with sources. First, he must identify his sources. He must distinguish between a primary and secondary source. In making use of his primary source material, the historian is engaged in selection, then evaluation and interpretation, synthesis into coherent and sequential statements or facts of history. Because the information provided for the sake of information may not really be information at all, the historian must be aware of its significance. This awareness can be achieved through evaluation. Sources are evaluated through internal and external criticisms. Internal criticism is the evaluation of the sources for plausibility and consistency while external criticism is the comparison of the sources with other evidence on the topic. This will enable the historian to be sure that the information is authentic, that it is what it purports to be.

On the problem of historical knowledge, the effort to demonstrate the specific character of historical knowledge and understanding has led to a new method of enquiry in historical research, the analytical or scientific approach (Osarhieme, 1993). This method established the procedures and categories used by practising historians in handling and understanding their material. This has led to a discussion of the ways in which historians divide up and classify the past, the manner in which they argue for and substantiate their interpretation, and the logical structure of the explanations they offer. Clearly, this new method of enquiry is very useful in finding and exploiting historical evidences. This will also enable historians to make credible claims to their statements about the past.

Concerning the problem of historical objectivity, it must be stated that objectivity in historical reconstruction is possible and indeed desirable. A historian is essentially trained to be objective in his selection, analysis and interpretation of evidence. Unless he tries as much as possible to be objective, his person and work would hardly be respected (Akindele, 2005). The strong reliance on historical information in the Third World countries in recent times points to the acceptance of history as the outcome of objective research. Though, absolute objectivity in history is impossible, the historian could substantially reduce subjectivity in his work by taking certain measures. First, he must strive to authenticate all available evidences. Second, documentary evidence must measure up to certain standards. That is, documents must be genuine. The historian must determine whether such documents are original or secondary. It is also important to ascertain the status of the historian as E. H. Carr counseled, "Study the historian before studying the past". Third, the historian must strive to understand the meaning of the document he has. Fourth, the principle of corroboration must be fully adhered to by the historian. Fifth, African historiographers in particular, must adopt sources from other disciplines like Botany, Linguistics, Archaeology, e.t.c. Lastly, historical interpretation should be based on available evidences, and not on apriori or prejudicial basis.

The difficulties of contemporary historical reconstruction are equally surmountable. Marc Block, for example while rejecting the claim that recent events are inappropriate for an objective historical research argued that what is required is for the historian to observe the “Thucydidean” tenets of contemporary historical research (Finley, 1959). Secondly, it is important for the historian to search diligently, analyse as impartially as humanly possible and be selective in his approach because of the large mass of documents available to him. In addition, witnesses should be contacted to crosscheck the authenticity of the documents. Thirdly, the historian must behave like a true anthropologist – neutral, detached and impassionate. His professional ethics should take primacy above his personal interests. He must be primarily concerned with observing and having an in-depth understanding of his subject rather than to condemn (Ogen, 2006). Fourthly, the issues under consideration may be grouped into specialized fields such as business, labour, maritime or intellectual history instead of the conventional geographical and chronological groupings. Fifthly, a contemporary historian must possess some personal attributes which include a deep sense of responsibility, controlled imagination, prudence and the capacity for sound judgement. Lastly, he must be sound intellectually and be erudite not only in history but also in other fields of knowledge (Uzoigwe, 1989).

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, certain points stand out clear. First, that the major challenges of historical research revolve around the problems of sources, character of historical knowledge, objectivity, explanation, choice of subject, and the peculiar problems of contemporary history. Second, that these challenges can be surmounted by the historian through the adoption of certain measures some of which have been detailed upon earlier in this work. Finally, it must be emphasized that the efficacy of the recommended measures would depend largely on the adoption of the proper attitude by the historian towards his profession. Against all odds, the historian must endeavour to execute his work with professionalism as the paramount consideration. This is the only way history can enhance and sustain its relevance.

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