THE HUMANITIES COURSE

UNDERSTANDING AND PRESERVING HISTORY
IN THE MAKING: THE CASE OF NIGERIA

BY

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Lecture 16: 3
UNDERSTANDING HISTORY:

Just as the present is by and large a product of the past so is the future of the present. This is the point of the continuity of history. By the same token the present is meaningful only in terms of the past just as the future is going to be in terms of the present. This historical reality is appreciated by those who understand history as a process of development. This understanding imbues us with the historical sense which informs and influences our thoughts, feelings and actions.

The historian appreciating the bearing of the past on the present tries to discover as much of the past as possible for an explanation of the present. His search is as exhaustive as possible, his narrative as detailed and his analysis as rigorous. The hallmark of the historical craft is in-depth analysis and all-embracing synthesis. The point being made is that history being a study in development the deeper, more exhaustive and more wide-ranging the historian is in his exercise the more accurate, sound and meaningful is his analysis and conclusion. This will require the cooperation of historians in different areas of the history discipline. It will also require the services and cooperation of as many of the functionally related disciplines as possible. Among these are archaeology, anthropology, sociology, geography, economics, linguistics, ethnobotany, numismatics and others. Archaeology, for example, by studying the material remains of history has extended our historical time to millions of years. As Thurstan Shaw, an archaeologist, has remarked "it is prehistory (the field of archaeology) as a whole which gives us the right perspective" of human history. Linguistics on its part helps the historian to establish the ethnic relationships between peoples. It is linguistics that uncovers one of the underlying unities in the emergent Nigerian nation. The historian's multi-disciplinary approach is obviously an advance in his attempt to understand his people's present through the study of their past. Each of the disciplines that come into this approach contributes individually or in combination with others to our better understanding of our history. The multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary approach was ably championed in Nigeria by the late Prof. K.O. Diye, and it is being increasingly appreciated by our historians.

The historian also has the greater duty of making more and more of his people aware of the historical process by which present realities can be made meaningful. He should get them to see why or rather how we have come to have English as our lingua franca (at least for the time being), a federal constitution, a predominantly Muslim North and
Christian South, a capitalist oriented economy, rural - urban drift, turbulent politics and so on. It is the study of history that will help us to appreciate all that, and it is significant that the present Nigerian leadership is asking historians to uncover the historical roots of the nation’s present problems.

**PRESERVING HISTORY**

The issue of preserving our history in the making is a crucial one to anyone who appreciates what the present owes to the past and future. As indicated elsewhere man has all along appreciated the value of the historical record from the time he became *Homo sapiens*. Originally he had the oral and material record. With time he added the written record to these. Written historical records are said to go as far back as 3000 B.C. Formal and organised record keeping or archives started between the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. when "the Athenians kept their valuable documents in the Temple of the mother of gods ..."

Man’s attempt at recording history was directed towards the preservation and advancement of his historical knowledge with a view to a better ordering and planning of his present and future. In Nigeria today there are various ways in which our history is being preserved though the efforts are not as commendable as they should be.

**PRESERVATION OF ORAL DATA**

There have been efforts to recapture and preserve our oral traditions. Excellent examples in this direction are those of Samuel Johnson in his *The History of the Yorubas* and Jacob Egbareva in his *A Short History of Benin*. Later these efforts were augmented by those of professional historians like K.O. Biko, S.O. Biobaku, E.J. Alagoa and others. These efforts are however only a small fraction of what needs to be done. In fact it was the realization of this enormous gap that led K.O. Biko to initiate the Benin History Scheme and the Eastern History Research Scheme. These efforts are also being reinforced by those of Institutes of African Studies in some of our universities and of history undergraduates, post-graduate students and lecturers in these institutions. History students in other institutions of higher learning also contribute their quota. Materials collected in oral interviews are used in the writing of original long essays or theses, books, monographs or mimeographs. The more important part of the long essays and theses from the point of view of historical reconstruction is of course the verbatim report of the interviews.

Although oral traditions are a considerable part of our present historical sources oral history - concerned with events of the recent past up to the present - should form the bulk of oral data. Oral history
would appear to be richer, more comprehensive and more balanced as it
deals with the experiences of all sections of the populace, including
the under-privileged and so-called common man.

All data collected from oral interview whether on our remote or
recent past including present history contribute to our understanding
of our present condition or state of being. Oral data is best collected
in a verbatim form, preferably with the help of tapes. These would later
be transcribed into written forms known as transcripts (of the reports).
For double insurance against the risk of loss or damage, both taped and
written versions of the collected data should be produced. These should
be deposited in places where they can easily be reached by those wishing
to consult them.

The depositing of the collected data would be a meaningless and
wasteful exercise if adequate arrangement is not made about their
storage. Hence depositaries constructed to take in the continual inflow
of tapes, manuscripts and transcripts. Government should provide enough
fund for the construction, maintenance, and manning of specially designed
and equipped depositaries with adequate reading space, and photocopying
facilities.

Adequate information should be given about the existence and
location of these depositaries and their holdings. What is more Govern-
ment should give adequate financial support to those engaged in the
important task of retrieving our oral historical data.

**PRESERVATION OF WRITTEN DATA**

Written data take various forms. Among these are books, monographs,
and mimeographs; journals, newspapers and magazines; dissertations,
conference papers and commissioned reports; letters, diaries and memoirs;
minutes, calendars and inscriptions of all kinds. Written data form the
largest source of historical material in a literate society. Similarly
too they form the bulk of historical source material as regards our
recent past including our colonial past.

At first the history of our recent past was written mostly by
foreigners. But within the past couple of decades or so Nigerians have
come to play a major role in the writing of our history. However, as
Prof. J.E.A. Ajayi has pointed out, Nigerians historians tend to shy away
from the writing of contemporary history. This should not be so. It is,
however, fair to say that it is not usually easy to get the necessary
raw data—government, business, private and personal papers—on which
the writing will be based.

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(i) **LIBRARIES**

The collection and safe-keeping of written materials for public use is usually the function of libraries. Libraries are the soul, the hub of educational institutions, at least the higher ones. The rate of library development among a people is an index of the place of education among them. And since, as late President J.F. Kennedy has rightly remarked, "a nation cannot develop faster than its education", Nigeria must make more vigorous and determined effort to see that our libraries are adequately equipped with books and other written materials, reading space and photocopying facilities. In fact government effort should extend beyond adequate equipment of existing libraries to their expansion including the establishment of new ones, particularly public and mobile ones. Businesses and public-spirited individuals should play a more impressive role in the founding and funding of libraries.

(ii) **ARCHIVES**

Related to the libraries are the archives. An archive is usually described as a place where public records or historical documents are kept or preserved. Another definition concentrating on the contents of the archival establishment describes archives as the records of any public or private institution (a term which includes government offices, firms, churches and museums, associations and unions, and even private families) which are adjudged worthy of permanent preservation for reference and research purposes and which have been deposited or have been selected for deposit in an archival institution.

A number of things distinguish archives from libraries. While libraries stock printed materials, archives usually do not. They stock manuscripts or typed materials, whereas they stock original copies of these and with one such copy in each case, libraries stock many copies of printed publications. Books or other printed materials may be found in archives but these are secondary or peripheral holdings. Further, the archive materials usually come in a group, like the contents of a file, originating from the same source - person, office, or institution. On the other hand library collections are made up of various distinct items whose significance does not depend on their relationship to each other. Another important distinction is that archives stock materials which are no longer used by those who created, procured or received them in the first place. They are usually termed "dead" records. Finally, while libraries lend out their materials, archives do not.
In the light of the last point of difference above archives should make extra effort to render optimum service in the areas they can do so. Archivists should advertise more the role of the archives in the collection, safe-keeping and rehabilitation of documents entrusted to their care. They should also solicit for the deposit of the documents not needed by their owners or for which their owners have no storage place.

When it is realized that the records they preserve have special merits - rare because unique in each case, authentic because usually more confidential and less distorted extra effort should be made to ensure their preservation. Government should provide adequate funds for the provision of storage facilities which would afford maximum protection to the documents from fire, flood, hostile weather conditions, rodents, insect pests and thieves. The archive buildings should have adequate and comfortable reading space and other facilities for researchers.

The development of archives in Nigeria has not been an impressive one. It was not until 1954 that the National Archives of Nigeria was established, thanks to the influence of late Prof. K.O. Dike. Its headquarters was in Ibadan, with regional offices in Enugu (1956) and Kaduna (1957). The National Archives Act of 1957 was, among other things, to enable the regions operate, their own archives, while the establishment of the archives in the regions was intended to promote greater historical awareness among the people. Today, however, little is known about the existence (if any) of state much less local government archives. Government needs to pursue a more vigorous policy in archives development for "the measure of a nation's civilization has always been judged by the pride it places on its written records which form the raw materials of history". The ancients seem to have appreciated this fact more than we appear to do.

The task of creating archives should, however, not be left to the government alone. Private businesses and public-spirited individuals should help fund or endow our archives - national, state or local. More than this people should be educated on the need to preserve records or to turn in their unwanted documents to the established archives.

PRESERVATION OF MATERIAL DATA: MUSEUMS

Museums are another important means of preserving the nation's history. While libraries and archives deal with the written records of history, museums handle the material relics of history. Museums generally deal with objects of antiquity, known for short as antiquities. These are usually the precious finds of the archaeologist: stone-age tools, terra-cotta figurines bronze and iron objects and so on. The Ife, Benin and Igbo-Ukwu bronzes and the Nok and Yelwa terra-cotta are excellent examples. These and other material relics are the precious holdings of our national and other museums including the university ones.
As with the National Archives the year 1954 is an important one in the history of Nigerian museums. The year marked the establishment of the Antiquities Commission which was charged with the responsibility of drawing up policy for the preservation of Nigerian antiquities. The Commission has, through the Federal Dept. of Antiquities, established national museums, while assisting other types of museums in the country. Today there are nine national museums five of which are fully established and open to the public while the remaining four are projected and in various stages of development. The five fully established ones are the Jos Museum (1952), Lagos (1957), Oron (1958), Benin (1960) and Kaduna (1975). Those being established are the Enugu, Ibadan, Sokoto and Maiduguri museums, all at state capitals. In addition to these museums there are over ten ancient sites and monuments. There are also other categories of museums - the non-national ones - which are no less significant. Among these are the Kano, Ife, and Owo museums; the University museums at Nsukka, Lagos, Ibadan, Ife and Zaria; and the Government Departmental museums in Owo, Kaduna and Zaria. There are also museums built up by individuals like family heads or traditional rulers, art teachers and archaeologists. In fact these collectors have been the main sources of the collections or holdings of the national and some institutional museums.

It should be noted at this juncture that museums can and should also hold contemporary pieces or relics. These reflect contemporary historical reality. They are valuable in depicting in concrete form historical change over time.

It is obvious to the thoughtful observer that museums play an important role in the preservation of our history past and present. They expose us to the culture of our fathers, endow us with respect for our cultural heritage and help us appreciate our indebtedness to our forebears.

The study of the historical relics especially those of our prehistory imbues us with better perspective of historical events. In this way we come to appreciate more fully what has gone into the making of the present.

The museums are also useful in bringing history alive to us as we behold before us concrete relics of times past. This in turn increases our capacity for empathy, sympathy and vivid conjuring up of events past.

Museums, where they hold contemporary pieces, can be a source of inspiration and honour to living producers of these pieces, and a pride to the locality producing them. Besides these collections enhance the economic value of museums as tourist attractions.

In a rapidly materialistic - inclined society the creation of museums of natural history should go a long way in enhancing our appreciation of the beauty of nature and the value of preserving nature in its pristine...
form. The University of Ife has given a lead in this direction.

Whether they deal with antiquities, contemporary pieces, or natural history, museums are along with the other historical sources, vital in our recovery, preservation and interpretation of our past and present. They help to show the link between the past including the recent past and the present.

Again as in the case of archives, there is need to educate people adequately on the existence and role of museums in our life. People should be encouraged to submit museum pieces that may come their way to the nearest museum establishment or school teacher. Government or the Antiquities Commission should in addition to the already established or projected ones, encourage the establishment of museums in localities where finds or collections justify such establishment. What is more local arts and crafts should be made part of these museums to make museum-creation a living and highly rewarding exercise.

CONCLUSION

History is a vast reality embracing the totality of human experience. The historian in trying to understand and interpret it has to reckon not only with the various aspects of man's experience but also with the enormous time-span of that experience. When he concentrates on any one aspect or a particular period of time he does so for convenience and manageability, conscious, however, of the fact that what he does has to be related to wider reality to be meaningful. Hence the Nigerian historian, for example, employs the multi-disciplinary or inter-disciplinary approach. It is a methodology that brings in both the time and various other aspects of history in historical enquiry. Today this approach to the study of our history is no less urgent and imperative. Outside this, government, historian, layman and the entire populace should recognise our indebtedness to the past and our obligation to the future and should do their utmost to preserve our history including contemporary history for the benefit of the present and on-coming generations.

QUESTIONS

READING LIST


2. NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF NIGERIA, Ibadan, Ocopoye Publishing Co., n.d.


QUESTIONS:

1. Assess the place of the multidisciplinary approach in the study of Nigerian history.

2. Analyse the relative importance of archives, libraries and museums in the reconstruction and preservation of Nigerian history.

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