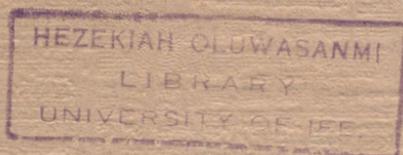


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# HISTORY AND SOCIETY

by B. Olatunji Oloruntimehin

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**HISTORY AND SOCIETY**

by

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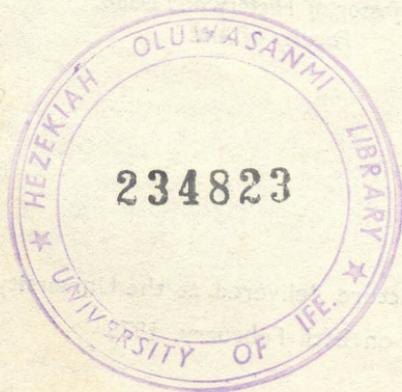
An Inaugural Lecture delivered at the University of Ife  
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## INTRODUCTION

MR VICE-CHANCELLOR, I feel honoured and privileged that I have the opportunity to deliver my inaugural lecture before this distinguished audience. I understand that it is the first to be delivered by a historian in this University. However, I must confess to some diffidence in doing so. For one thing, I am a rather new comer to the University, and newer still as a member of the unit that has formal responsibility for history as a subject. Although I have been a happy member of the community of historians since I came here as a research professor, I became a member of the department of history only when I was redeployed in the recent restructuring and reform of the University as a system. It is against this background of limited experience that I entertain the feeling that, by addressing you now, I might be rushing like a fool where angels have feared to tread. Nonetheless, I feel encouraged by the fact that the world of scholarship is a universal one, and that the real purpose of an inaugural lecture is better served if delivered at the beginning, or as close as possible to the beginning, of one's tenure as a professor.

In the tradition of our people, I wish to pay homage to those who have had the duty of cultivating the discipline of history in this University. Dr. Saburi Biobaku must be mentioned first in spite of the fact that he was associated with the department only for a fleeting moment. He did a great deal for history and related disciplines as founder and first director of the Institute of African Studies at a time when the African component of the curricula of the University was still scanty and needed tending by a protecting hand. Up till now, Dr. Biobaku has remained tireless in popularising the idea of history and in stimulating public awareness of the value of cultural studies in a technological age. As far as history within the University of Ife is concerned, Professor I. A. Akinjogbin easily comes to the forefront as the longest serving member, and as the single individual who has had the privilege and the challenge to have been the head of the department for almost a decade now. Professor Akinjogbin has devoted his entire career as a university teacher to the department. Indeed, the image of the department bears clear imprints of his own as a scholar. It could hardly have been otherwise since the department itself is less than fourteen years old. The growth of the department in this relatively short period has been remarkable, and all who, in their varied ways, have contributed to it deserve commendation. I feel honoured to be a member, and, as a believer in collective effort, I pledge my loyalty to the task of developing the discipline in a virile and purposive way. I believe there is a lot still to be done to build an Ife School of history—especially in the area of

research and postgraduate training, in the latter of which the department is still very much a toddler.

It remains for me publicly to acknowledge my indebtedness to my teachers, colleagues and former students at Ibadan. I was fortunate to have been a member—as student and teacher—in what was a vigorous, well-motivated, open and critical community of scholars which has made an enviable impact and has set standards in historical research in a way that has not only brought credit to the University of Ibadan, but is also a pride to all dedicated historians in the country. Ironically, public recognition of the achievements of individual members of the department over the last few years has tended to place the department in the doldrums at the moment. One hopes that it will recover its vigour very soon.

IN THINKING OF what subject to discuss in my inaugural lecture, I was first tempted to present an assessment of the state of knowledge in African history, especially of those aspects of it that have interested me most, namely the study of political and social change and diplomatic history. However, I settled for a broad subject like 'History and Society', and to attempt therein to provide answers to such questions as: what is history?, what should we teach, how and why? I thought this audience and the public are entitled to demand of whoever is giving this University's first inaugural lecture in history an explanation of the essence of the subject and its role in society. Even for students of history and for people like me who have made a career of studying the subject, an exercise like this could still be rewarding. There is also the fact that such a discussion is indeed topical in view of queries being raised through some of the mass media in recent weeks by some newspaper columnists about the need for teaching the humanities and social sciences (including history) when the country should be struggling for rapid material growth through technological development. Indeed, a columnist recently equated the teaching of the humanities and the social sciences to the expression of the colonial state of mind of those responsible for it in the universities. It is cheering to note, however, that the gloomy picture of universities projected by the same columnist has provoked a number of people to a spirited defence of the teaching of the humanities and the social sciences.

There have, of course, been diverse reactions to history and historians throughout the ages. Prejudices against history and historians are expressed in aphorisms like: 'History is bunk', and 'Uncle Cock-robins'. The latter stereotype was often used to taunt history students when I was an undergraduate at Ibadan. Other reactions reflect different levels of perception of the nature and role of history. Such are, for example, epigrams like: 'The history of the world, is but the biography of great men'; 'History is past politics, and politics present history'; 'History is philosophy teaching by examples'; 'History—that excited and deceitful old woman!' 'All history is modern history', and 'History is something that never happened, written by a man who wasn't there'.<sup>1</sup> These statements do not show any consensus on history and historians. Practising historians do not project a coherent or uniform picture of their subject. The only agreement is that the subject should exist, an agreement which could even be treated as an expression of enlightened self-interest. The reasons for this will be explored presently.

Apart from the seemingly kaleidoscopic image of the subject, history, as part of the humanities and social sciences, is under

pressure because, not being a profession like law, accountancy, estate management and so on, people, in an age that is highly utilitarian ask for relevance.

It must be stressed at this juncture that the problem which faces history and historians is that faced by all areas of human activities not seen by the consumers as being of an applied or practical nature. For example, the pure or basic sciences are under pressure, even though knowledgeable people appreciate that the applied sciences which have the pride of place these days depend heavily on the results of work done in the pure or basic sciences. There is little doubt that we are in an age of materialism, interested primarily in pursuits and results of demonstrable, immediate benefit. It is an age which conceives of progress nearly exclusively in terms of affluence and technological feat. The problem is sometimes confounded by streaks of anti-intellectualism which cannot but have history, as part of the humanities or the social sciences, as a primary target of attack.

There is perhaps some irony in the fact that history has always been and remains a popular subject in spite of prejudices often expressed against it. It is almost always taken for granted that history should be a regular feature of the curricula throughout the school system, from the primary to university level. It is perhaps because of its popularity, together with the concomitant fact that a large number of people with, understandably, varied levels of competence, handle it, that there have always been different responses to it as illustrated earlier on.

The situation is also explicable by the fact that history and society are inextricably linked phenomena. History is the study of society in time perspective. The point has also been made that society is history. Guy Rocher gives the clearest expression to this in his book on Social Change when he says:

Society is history. It is constantly engaged in an historical movement, in a transformation of itself, its members; of its environment as of other societies with which it maintains relations. It stirs up, undergoes or receives ceaselessly both internal and external forces which modify its nature, its orientation and its destiny. Whatever its manner—sudden, gradual or even imperceptible—every society experiences changes every day. These changes are more or less in harmony with the past of the society and follow a more or less explicit pattern or plan . . . It (society) is also movement and change of a collectivity over time . . .<sup>2</sup>

Every society is historically determined to the extent that it is a living record of important and continuing reactions to changes in

its social, economic and political life, and may be seen, in itself, as a special kind of map by which the nature of the changes can be explored. The task of the historian is to study and interpret the changes embodied in society and explain the reasons for them.

The task of the historian is neither easy nor exclusive. Just as society is many-faceted, so also its history, as of the problem of studying it. This is part of the explanation of the many images of history and the historian. History shares the task of interpreting changes in society with other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Such other disciplines are alternative ways of looking at the same object.

In practically all societies over all the ages history has been a major instrument for organising and interpreting their collective and individual experiences to provide understanding for the present and a guide for the future. In particular, history has always been used to provide political education for the leadership elites in all societies.

It has also been the principal medium for the transmission of culture, including the cosmology of the people. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> culture represents the sinews and the most enduring features of any society. Colonial masters recognised this fact and ensured that they rested their control upon the transmission of their own culture—an exercise which reflected in the transfer of economic, political and social institutions from the metropole to the colonies, and in the raising of a new set of elites through the inculcation of the values and orientations of the colonising societies. The effects of our colonial experience are still with us today in the public institutions and orientations of our leadership elites, all co-existing rather incongruously with indigenous ones. The persistence of indigenous African institutions and values owes largely to the fact that a sense of history and tradition has always been a part of our peoples' way of life.

For our people, history is a living, dynamic reality. It embraces subjects which, according to the academic traditions in which most of us have been formed, we are used to treating as different branches of knowledge, especially subjects like Government or Political Science, Sociology, Philosophy and Religion. In Africa, history is a means of promoting understanding of, and a respect for, the institutions and practices of the community. Through it, society offers explanations of the world as conceived by it—the origin of land and sea, man and the other species, the origin of the state, the basis of different laws and customs, the title of the community to its land, how and why it differs from its neighbours in its religion and customs. In the process of doing this, concern was often not with accurate chronology and causation, elements that became distinguishing features of European historiography from the nineteenth century

onwards. Nor was it merely descriptive and concerned mainly with understanding the past for its own sake, as some in Europe have argued and is evident from the works of several of us trained and practising in that tradition. For the African, history is part of the general philosophy of life as, indeed, it was in many parts of Europe until the scientific revolution split philosophy into many parts.

The task of relating the past to the present and the future in all aspects of life of the society is obviously a complex one. This explains the fact that the practitioners of history are not just those who will go by the label of historians these days. Indeed kings, priests and diviners were and are, not only historians in their own right, but also embodiments of history. A corollary to this fact is that history is not just a record and interpretation of events; it is an existentialist phenomenon, lived and felt. This is why it is expressed not only in narrative, but also in sacred poetry as in the divination poems of many African peoples, for example in the *Odu Ifa* of the Yoruba, in ritual re-enactments and religious manifestations. The overriding concern is to inculcate the belief in the continuity of life, and the society as a living community incorporating its ancestors, the present members and the future members still to be born, and in this way to give much-needed sense of direction and control as society goes through change, which may involve a modification of its culture, a phenomenon which is present in all societies.

Africans pursue the objectives sketched here in various ways. They do this formally through educational institutions such as are connected with puberty rites, initiation to age grades and secret societies, and the training and initiation of priests and diviners. Of particular importance in this respect are the ceremonies leading to the enthronement of a new king. As the embodiment of the traditions of his people, a king-elect is initiated into the secrets of his ancestors and the lores and mores of his people. More than that, partly as ritual offerings to the ancestors, partly as entertainment and education of the people at large, the traditions of the people are recited publicly; symbolic events from the past are dramatised, the names, genealogies, cognomens, titles and praise songs of the ancestors are chanted. The new king himself announces his own title and thereby signifies the expected character of his reign. The praise singers respond to this and a new phase in the life of the people is launched.<sup>4</sup>

Reference has been made to the role of priests and diviners as historians. Apart from these highly trained and philosophical sets, history is handled as political education through court historians or chroniclers. In many societies, carefully trained and selected historians are maintained in the palaces of the kings and in the courts of very important chieftains. Their functions are to keep the factual traditions of the people in such matters as the lists of kings and other

chieftains; chronicles of each reign; the appellations and praise verses of each king and the leading chiefs; genealogies, laws and customs. The primary purpose is to guide the ruling elites through appropriate education in history. Hence court historians like the *Aròkin* of the *Ọyọ* Yoruba, and the *griots* among the Mande peoples of the Western Sudan, do not consider their job done by merely narrating the story: they interpret in a way to guide the king, by overtly or indirectly criticising the king's actions or plans. Among the Mande of Senegal, Guinea, Mali etc. the *griots* who have been well-trained for several years by reputed persons in training centres like Dioubaté and Keyla in Mali, are given the title "BELEN-TIGUI"—'Master of Speech' or orators in recognition of the fact that they have been trained both in history and oratory<sup>5</sup>. As wise men, these historians must have mastery of language to enable them communicate their message through figures of speech and nuances as occasions demand.

Among these historians, the concept of history is much larger than the European idea of history as linear development. Consequently, time or dating is not invested with autonomy or aura of respect for its sake. For them time is significant only 'as an aspect of the occasion, the purpose, the need met, not something expendable in its own right.'<sup>6</sup> The difficulty which historians trained in European historiography have in understanding some of the material presented in oral traditions results partly from the failure to appreciate the relativity of time to purpose or occasion. For instance, what may appear to be well-preserved and factual narration may be really symbolic, just as apparent biographies may be really summary interpretations of the experiences of the communities concerned over a period of time. I suggest that the roles of culture heroes in many African societies must be approached in this way. We can hardly appreciate the correct importance of culture heroes like *Oduwa* of the Yoruba; the *Ogiso* and *Eweka* among the Bini; *Bayajiddah* or *Abu Yezid* of the Hausa kingdoms; *Riale* and *Oubri* among the Mossi of present-day Upper Volta; or *Khaladian Koulibali* of the Bambara of present-day Mali; not to speak of the many culture heroes of many of the Bantu peoples of East Africa,<sup>7</sup> if we approach them with Europe-defined technically historical approach. Stories about these culture heroes need not be seen as factual narrations; nor are they, on the other hand, just myths.

It seems more appropriate to see them as the use of history by the respective societies to establish a political and social order, or what has been called a 'basic charter of life which could be adapted and modified but could not be completely changed'. They are cases to illustrate the point made by Meyer Fortes that 'a hard and fast line cannot be drawn between the inner realm of mind and the outer world of society and custom.'<sup>8</sup> L.-V. Thomas, a distinguished French

sociologist, has rightly warned, in relation to the stories of origin of the Mossi states, that these need not be taken as "positive" history; rather they should be taken as 'histoire-mythico-métaphysique'—history, that is, in the phenomenological sense.<sup>9</sup> There is no doubt that these stories and the ideologies associated with them such as the *nam* among the Mossi, and the 'golden stool' among the Asante in modern Ghana are illustrations of the use of history in social engineering. As integrative ideologies, they represent in pre-colonial Africa what Clifford Geertz has described as '... most distinctively maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience.'<sup>10</sup>

Before leaving the subject of history within African societies, past and present, I want to refer to what practically all of us must be familiar with—that microcosms of what I have described for the society at large exist at the level of individual lineages and families. I personally always feel moved each time the lineage and family traditions with their lessons are recited by their repositories, the elders, especially the older women, including wives. These *oriki*, with their variants like *Oriki Oriḽ* as the Yoruba call them, have the function of giving a clear sense of identity and sense of purpose, which every human being needs. Indeed, for some of us, the names we bear are a constant reminder of the circumstances of our being and our situation as members of society.

## II

I HAVE GONE into this rather long excursion on the place of history in society, especially African societies for a number of reasons. It has not been part of my purpose to prove that Africans have a history: that would have been like flogging a dead horse, for even the most inveterate of colonial, racist propagandists have by now acknowledged the fact. I believe that we have a good deal to learn from our people's concept and practice of history. As academics, while recognising the need for specialisation, we must accept, in the African tradition, the comprehensiveness of the nature and scope of our subject. In an era in which the pursuit of knowledge is done in so many bits and pieces, with the practitioners of each bit being jealous of its specialism, we must always realise that history is a meeting ground for several disciplines, that it is an inclusive, mediating subject. A simple illustration of this view is that not only do all disciplines have their histories, the proper understanding of them rests upon studies of an historical nature. Hence, we have subjects like economic history, social history, history of thought, philosophy of history, historical sociology, legal history, history of science and

technology, medical history and so on. The lesson of the situation, it seems to me, is that history is not a separate mode of thought, but the common home of many interests, techniques and traditions.<sup>11</sup> We cannot escape the fact that history is an interdisciplinary subject, and we must organise our research and teaching accordingly. History, as conceived in African societies, is a discipline which demonstrates the fragility of the divides which have been erected in the process of organising our academic activities.

Having said this, however, we have to emphasise that the society which the historian seeks to study and interpret is such a complex, many-sided entity that no single scholar can hope to master it in its entirety. To be effective, the historian has to specialise. The practice, which has been rightly criticised by several authors, of concentrating on holistic chronological, political history and within it touching upon economic, religious, social issues and so on, in an amateurish fashion, will not do. It must be realised that one cannot write a good political or economic history without being, in a good measure, a political scientist or economist. Nor can one study or teach history of science without being trained in the sciences. What is needed is that the specialist historian must learn and practise in a symbiotic relationship with that aspect of society on which he is specialising. The palace historian does this in relation to the political and administrative life of his state; just as the priest and diviner do in relation to the religion and thought systems of the society. If we do this, we will pursue our studies with the required vigour, purpose and appropriate analytical tools. We can then truly understand and explain. We will thereby escape the righteous indignation of professional colleagues like the distinguished historian, Lucien Febvre, who is quoted as saying that

... there were too many historians who were conscientious, industrious and well-educated, who wrote history as their grandmothers had applied themselves to the most finicky of tapestry-work, and who only sought to find out what had happened...<sup>12</sup>

As I have pointed out, in African societies, history is concerned with the unity of past and present, not with the past for its own sake.

A corollary to this is that there is no validity in the distinction made between technical history, conceived in the positivist tradition of Ranke, and contemporary history. It is not just the African attitude to history that rejects this distinction, many historians in other continents are realising this increasingly as they are compelled to modify their conception of the past. The following argument by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. sums up the discussion admirably:

The fundamental explanation lies... in the acceleration of the rate of social change—an acceleration produced by the cumula-

... tive momentum of science and technology ... This acceleration has meant ... that the "present" becomes the "past" more swiftly than ever before in the history of man. What historians perceive as the "past" is today chronologically much closer than it was when historical change was the function, not of days, but of decades. In the 12th century, the historian's "past" was centuries back; in the nineteenth century it was a generation or two back. Now it is yesterday.

At the same time, the emergence of a more extensive educated public than the world has ever known has increased the popular demand for knowledge about problems that torment modern man. History becomes an indispensable means for organizing public experiences in categories conducive to understanding ...<sup>13</sup>

This, to me, is one of the clearest arguments ever made in favour of a problem-oriented study of history, a history which will have obvious relevance by fulfilling social needs. The basic role of history is to clarify the structural changes which have shaped the modern world. These changes derive their significance from the fact that they determine the framework or setting of present actions. A dichotomy between the past and the present cannot be sustained because as Geoffrey Barraclough says:

*Contemporary history begins when the problems which are actual in the world today first take visible shape; it begins with the changes which enable, or rather which compel, us to say that we have moved into a new era . . . .*<sup>14</sup>

This is what I mean when I define history as the study of society in time perspective. The nature of history is modified by changes that affect the nature of society itself.

The logic of this argument for our training programmes is that we need greater flexibility than is provided for in our present curricula. History students need sound foundation courses in, at least, one other discipline in the humanities and/or the social sciences. We should be moving away from the kind of curriculum that is conceived as a collectivity of outline courses on so many societies and which can only lead to the production of historians who are equipped with approaching problems only with trained common sense or old-fashioned literalism in analysing problems. That is an inadequate substitute for a firm knowledge of the subject matter that we need for a base.

There is probably a need to take another look at the philosophy and structure of our degree programmes, especially at the logic behind distinguishing between single and combined honours courses. I have



my doubts about the validity of the distinction, and of the tendency to treat one as only a second cousin of the other. I am an advocate of the interdisciplinary approach for the simple reason that a full understanding of the complexity of man's experience cannot be attained through the medium of any single discipline. Partly because there is some arbitrariness about the partition of knowledge into disciplines, there is a good deal of dovetailing or overlapping, if not a continuum among disciplines. For a proper understanding of any problem of importance in human experience, we need to draw upon the resources of several disciplines. Take a subject like war, for example. It has traditionally been a common object of analysis for the historian, the philosopher, the jurist, the diplomatist, the sociologist, psychologist, even the theologian. The historian who writes about war only in terms of conflicts within or between states, and of the actions of rulers and soldiers, without adequate reflection of the fact that war is a social phenomenon, that it is an accelerated form of social change, will have contributed little to our understanding. The same applies to subjects like peace and revolution. The only rider I will like to put is the need for internal cohesion and coherence in our programmes. Unless our programmes are properly integrated they will not achieve our purpose regardless of whether we label them single or joint honours. No academic programme can be anything but a ragbag if it is a mere juxtaposition of courses.

Before leaving this point, I will like to emphasise that the observations made in relation to history apply equally to other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. We all need to indigenise our disciplines both in concept and practice. Our social scientists need to be reminded that they are essentially part of the humanities, or human sciences, in spite of their struggle to put on the garb of scientificism; that the theories which they use as analytical tools are products of specific experiences. There are no such things as neutral political or social theories because ideas and actions are all socially located, and therefore vary in their relevance and significance from society to society. As a historian, I will like to recall to our social scientists the need to establish a precise historical context for any particular observation, from which they wish to draw general conclusions or theories. The main purpose of theories or general definitions is to sharpen our awareness of the realities which they describe. An attractive, because seemingly universal, theory very often describes dissimilar realities in the life of different societies. A body of ideas called 'Law', we have been told by the late Professor Sir Ernest Barker, is a sum total of *Traditions of civility*<sup>15</sup>—which, needless to say, vary according to societies. Whatever our disciplines, the basic fact is that knowledge is the more beneficial when it is built upon a thorough understanding of the heritage of the society.

The interdependence of disciplines must be our basic assumption; and we must ensure that we avoid going about our disciplines in a way that it can be said about us, what has been remarked on the relationship between history and sociology—that is, ‘Sociology is history with the hard work left out; history is sociology with the brains out’.<sup>16</sup>

My own little experience as a researcher has emphasised to me how intricately linked are issues that are habitually separated under different labels and described as economic, political, social and religious. Nor can one pretend to understand a people’s thought about any of these issues without adequate grasp of their language. The Tukulor and Mande societies of the nineteenth century Western Sudan and the francophone states of modern West African, which have been the object of my research efforts, are a clear illustration of the fact that societies, as social realities, do not maintain the same kinds of divisions that we adopt in our academic pursuits. As living organisms, which have been described as institutions in process, the continuum between the past and present is a major characteristic.

In my study of the Islamic theocracy of the Tukulor, and of relations between it and the Mande, it is obvious that there can be no meaningful discussion of the political state except in relation to religion, philosophy, and the primordial structure of society and relations within it. Similarly my study of relations among the states in the area on one hand, and between them, collectively or individually, and the French on the other, has been sustained only through an interdisciplinary approach. As all students of international relations, and of diplomacy in particular, will confirm, there is indeed no alternative. As a political instrument of national policy, diplomacy is inseparable from other instruments or resources of an economic, military or psychological nature. More recently, I have found that in seeking to understand the processes of economic and social change in francophone West Africa, I have had to take a look at the educational system, and that, in relation to the political objectives of the dominant classes. All these imply that history is a bridge-builder among other disciplines.

History has a lot to contribute to the understanding of the other disciplines. But, like any other academic, the historian is limited in the scope of his knowledge and he must therefore draw upon the contributions of other scholars in the other disciplines. But he must put himself in a position to do so effectively—by learning the language that he may need, and studying enough of the other disciplines to be able to benefit from the findings of their practitioners. In other words, departmentalisation or division into faculties must be seen not as barriers but as challenges to us to enrich one another’s efforts, through collaboration, in the process of understanding society which

is really an indivisible entity. We all have our points of strength and weaknesses, and society is so large and complex a subject that, like the admonition of Dwight Waldo on administration,

. . .we should open upon it all the windows we can find; that all models and idioms have their virtues—and their vices; that as we proceed we exercise as much intelligence and good will as we can command in determining what any particular model can or cannot do for us.<sup>17</sup>

### III

SO MUCH FOR history as an academic pursuit. I will now try to highlight the relevance to us as citizens and as a nation. Perhaps the first point that should be made is that we must learn from our people the need to employ history as an instrument to create and maintain a distinctive identity for ourselves as a nation and as citizens of the nation. This is particularly important as a base for our effort at nation-building in an age of universalising technological changes. Our nation is among that part of the world now generally referred to as societies in transition. Without a clear sense of identity based on a sound historical education, we are in a danger of merely drifting along with others. In our quest for rapid modernisation, we must equip ourselves to discriminate in our borrowings from others. It is true that we are in an age of increasing internationalism; but we must not fail to appreciate that the international community is an aggregate of nations, each with its own distinctive character. Nationality is not merely to be defined legally, it should be so culturally as well. It has been aptly remarked that '. . .nationality and national character are the results as well as, if not rather than, the causes of history. We did not start with a national character; we developed one under stress of circumstances. . .'<sup>18</sup>

Related to the need for a clear national identity is the need for national ideology that will define a common future for the citizens. This is one of the uses of history in African societies, as indeed in all societies. For example, the Italians provided a focus for their efforts at unification by interpreting the history of their society and projecting from it the ideology of the *risorgimento*; the French still have their ideology of *francophonie* which embodies their desire to preserve the independence and integrity of their society and defines their policies towards the international community. An amalgamation like the United States of America has evolved the ideology of the 'melting pot'; so also have the British their ideology of unity in diversity.

The need for the cultivation of a collective consciousness which will

result from an acceptance of a common identity and common ideology cannot be overemphasised. It is these that will provide the much-needed Civil Order which can guarantee stability to the nation. A major explanation that has been given for the upheavals and political instability, including the endemic, often bloody, *coups d'état*, in post-colonial nations of Africa, is the absence of a Civil Order<sup>19</sup> which is defined as generally accepted traditions or conventions which guide behaviour in private or public life. Politicians, administrators and others who pursue the exercise of their powers as defined legally or constitutionally without awareness or adequate appreciation of the traditions or conventions that constitute the social base of their offices have been accused of contributing to instability in their society.

The same point may be treated in terms of the presence or absence of historical consciousness. Reference has been made to the role of history as an instrument for the transmission of culture and for social control. Many of us here are no doubt aware of how consideration of what the ancestors would think can often be a strong restraining factor in the comportment of an African. We are also aware that many would rather live modestly, but honourably, than pursue wealth in a way that will be considered reprehensible by society. Might it be too much to suggest that much of the evils we complain so much against in many of our public men could be due to the total absence, or the low level, of historical consciousness in them? Could the maddening struggle for power and wealth show regard for history? It seems to me that the transient nature of power which is implied in Pareto's dictum that 'History is a graveyard of aristocracies' is lost upon people involved. Our public men, indeed all of us who form the leadership élite, will do well to heed the advice that

. . . ruling classes do not justify their power exclusively by *de facto* possession of it, but try to find a moral and legal basis for it, representing it as the logical and necessary consequence of doctrines and beliefs that are generally recognized and accepted . . .<sup>20</sup>

As Nigerians, do we need any greater invitation to cultivate and be guided by a sense of history, in the tradition of our forebears, than the cumulative experience of our nation in the last decade?

#### IV

Before concluding, I want to recommend that the country needs a cultural policy as a matter of urgency. Not only has cultural revival

been a bedrock of development in other countries, the systematic study of the culture of the people through history and other disciplines remains a constant part of development. As I have remarked, nations are a product of history. Empire builders recognised this fact, hence they tried consciously to deny or distort our history, and to seek, instead, to integrate us as appendages in their own stream of historical development. The role of history in the re-awakening of a distinct sense of identity in the decolonisation processes throughout Africa and elsewhere is too well known to need repetition. We must recognise the need to sustain the effort partly as a means of promoting knowledge of ourselves and partly to give ourselves a sense of bearing in the ever-changing circumstances of the world society. As Michael Oakshott has observed,

. . . Those societies which retain, in changing circumstances, a lively sense of their own identity and continuity, . . . are to be counted fortunate, not because they possess what others lack, but because they have (ready) mobilized what none is without and all, in fact, rely upon.<sup>21</sup>

In a highly technological age, the nation must make massive effort to make its own contributions to knowledge in the Sciences and to improve the quality of life of the people. However, Sciences and technology, being neutral forces, do not in themselves create or sustain a nation. It has been truly remarked that

. . . only humans, if anyone, can ensure human progress beyond the caprices of an extrahuman will or the purposelessness of impersonal processes.

The only progress which we can care for is progress which we ourselves bring about, or can believe that we bring about.<sup>22</sup>

To advocate that studies in the sciences and technology should be pursued to the relative neglect of the humanities and social sciences is to express appetite for the materialism which technology creates rapidly, but without regard for the organic growth and stability of the society. Everyone of us, including the scientist and technologist, has to be a citizen. Without the socialising influence of training in the humanities the aggregation that we represent as citizens cannot be properly called a nation. A nation that lacks clear self-identity and which is structurally incoherent cannot be strong whatever its wealth and the amount of gadgetry at its disposal.

A national cultural policy should aim at giving us a basic charter of life—a kind of compass—with which we can confront new experiences with a good sense of bearing. Educational policy will reflect such a cultural policy. The point has been made that knowledge is culture.<sup>23</sup> Against that background, a national cultural policy will ensure that

our studies in the humanities and the sciences are pursued in a way that pays full attention to the untapped heritage of our society. In our search for acceptability into the European scholastic tradition, we tend not to seek to learn what we can from our society. It is with this in mind that I spoke earlier on of the need to indigenise concepts that we use as tools of analysis, especially in the humanities and social sciences.

A corollary to the above is that we need to treat the humanities and social sciences as policy sciences for tackling problems of a cultural or social nature. I have in mind the kind of considerations which led to the founding of the Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques in Paris in the 1870s, and of the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1895. Policy makers and advisers need to tap, more systematically, the store of knowledge that exists in the various faculties of our universities.

I want also to advocate, for both academic and national reasons, that we establish interdisciplinary area study programmes. Given my own interest in francophone African studies, it may be understood if I am naturally interested in this. In this connection, the authorities of the University deserve praise for their encouraging, even if modest, response to our proposals to establish area study programmes in the old Institute of African Studies. We have been able to make a little beginning with our plans on francophone Africa, Portuguese Africa and Afro-American Studies, beginning with Brazil.

On the academic plane, area studies provide the focus for a coherent interdisciplinary research and teaching which I have advocated earlier on. They could provide the opportunity for maximising the utilisation of scanty human resources in a situation in which there are relatively few people who are equipped to, and are working on, areas and issues outside their home country. Given the limited human and material resources available to them, most university departments have logically concentrated on studies of their own countries or societies. There is the primary need to know oneself first.

Yet, not only must one know one's neighbours, and even distant peoples, to promote human understanding; indeed, doing so is a necessary condition for one to have a full knowledge of oneself. There is the simple fact that one does not exist in a vacuum, and that one's situation is sometimes more clearly defined in relation to that of other people. Michael Oakshott's observation on the subject of political education is pertinent here:

... to know only one's own tradition is not to know even that ...  
but to investigate the concrete manner in which another people

goes about the business of attending to its arrangements may reveal significant passages in our own tradition which might otherwise remain hidden.<sup>24</sup>

This point is, I believe, born out of our studies of francophone and other areas of Africa. Similarly, preliminary reports of reconnaissance investigations in Brazil by two of my colleagues at the former institute—Professor Wande Abimbola and Dr. Fola Şoręmekun—have indicated that a good understanding of some of the communities there could enrich our knowledge of our own Yoruba society in Nigeria.

Nationally, area studies programmes could be a means for the nation to systematically build up a store of knowledge which could be drawn upon in solving problems of a local or international character. For example, if we had had the requisite knowledge, the panel that worked upon the question of a new federal capital might have been spared time and the trouble in going to various places for comparative experience. In our nation-building efforts we could draw lessons from our understanding of the actual experiences of other multi-national states. Our constitution-making exercises would certainly benefit from thorough knowledge of other countries not only in Africa, but elsewhere, such as the Netherlands, Switzerland, U.S.S.R., the United Kingdom, Latin America and East Asia.<sup>25</sup> For purposes of international relations, policy must necessarily rest on sound understanding of the societies concerned. It is Angola today, it can be any other area tomorrow. Area Studies Programmes represent a medium through which my suggestion that history and other disciplines in the human and social sciences be treated as policy sciences could be realised. This, I believe, is what is done through Foreign Areas study programmes of the United States of America and similarly conceived programmes in the advanced countries. It can also be regarded as a variant of the idea of the 'think tanks' which Professor Fafunwa of this University, among others, helped to bring to public attention recently.

It will be naive not to acknowledge the possible abuse that could come into the kind of relationship that I am suggesting between universities and the society. Such abuses in the American setting have been discussed in a work titled *The Dissenting Academy*.<sup>26</sup> I believe however, that universities cannot remain unengaged in relation to their societies. But even the effective performance of their role requires that universities maintain some detachment, the sort that is sometimes condemned as living in the 'ivory tower.' As has been said, the scholar needs to '... stand far enough back from society to get the perspective that is necessary for a critical study of experience and a thrashing out of underlying principles. . .'<sup>27</sup>

The expectation is that the policy maker or adviser will adapt the results of work done by the scholar in a detached, objective way.

Before ending this discussion of History and Society, I crave your indulgence to repeat my conclusion in a paper that I first presented to a conference at Yaoundé in December 1973 on the subject of 'The culture content of alien domination and its impact on contemporary Francophone West Africa':

... The need to know the past in order to understand the present and planning for the future can hardly be over-emphasised. Since all cultures are dynamic and capable of growth, the process of development will be less painful if based on a peoples' culture rather than on *a priori* claim that embracing an alien culture is a desideratum of progress. The Japanese experience illustrates this point. The educated elites need a change of orientation to be achieved through adaptation and Africanisation of the curricula and methods of instruction not only in the humanities and social sciences, but in the natural and applied sciences, so that courses and research are oriented towards understanding and solving problems, not the esoteric concerns of other lands with different economic and social bases.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, I will like to leave you with this quotation from a distinguished British historian on the crucial role of history in the life of the individual and of society.:

We cannot escape from history. Our lives are governed by what happened in the past, our decisions by what we believe to have happened. Without a knowledge of history, man and society would run adrift, rudderless craft on the uncharted sea of time . . .<sup>29</sup>

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