

UNIVERSITY OF IFE · NIGERIA

Inaugural Lecture Series 26

**HISTORY
AND NATION
BUILDING**

by I. A. Akinjogbin



UNIVERSITY OF IFE PRESS

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An Inaugural Lecture delivered at the University of Ife
on 28th November, 1977

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THIS INAUGURAL LECTURE comes unusually long after my occupancy of the first chair of History in this University, an event that occurred in September 1968. The postponement is the result of a deliberate choice made in the light of the circumstances surrounding the department and the University then and for a long time after. These circumstances will be found in the history of the growth of the department and the University and perhaps ought to be related briefly, especially as I have been a leading member of the team that built and nurtured this department to its present status, a privilege that is not given to most contemporary Professors of History in this country, who have inherited what other pioneers had built.

When I joined the department of history of this University on the 10th of October 1963, a year after its birth, there were two members of staff, both of them expatriates, one a full time member, of lecturer status, who was also acting as head of the department, and the other a peace corps assistant lecturer. Two more members joined at the same time as I did. One was an expatriate lecturer on secondment for a year from a secondary school in England, and the other a Nigerian assistant lecturer. The then Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University, Professor S. O. Biobaku, himself a renowned historian, was in the background to advise in case of any difficulties. The departmental library and the collection of books and documents on African History in the main library were yet to start. Two courses, one European and the other African, had been taught. Three more were to be started that year. Only a scholar committed to building would want to come to such a place.

The years 1963 to 1965 were a period of terrible political turmoil in this country, and the University of Ife was very badly affected. So bad was the situation that lecturers, both Nigerians and expatriates, were leaving, and not many people wanted to come. One of the reasons I stayed was because my students, on hearing of my resignation filed into my office led by Mr. S. O. Adesegun, and appealed to me to think of their future. I could not resist the appeal and I decided to wait for one more year on a lower pay than I would have got in Lagos, to see if the situation would improve in Ife.

On 15th of January 1966, before the year I gave myself ran out the first Nigerian military *coup d'etat* occurred. Fortunately, the University also got a new lease of life. In October that year, I became the acting head of Department. A year before, in October 1965, after I had decided to stay, I had been appointed the Acting Director of the Institute of African Studies when Dr. S. O. Biobaku then Director, was appointed Vice-Chancellor, University of Lagos. So in October 1966, I found myself administering two important units of the University, the Institute of African Studies and the

Department of History. The Institute of African Studies had six sections, each a different discipline, but it had only two research staff, one of whom was over sixty-five years old. The Department of History had one senior lecturer (myself), two lecturers and two assistant lecturers, teaching fourteen courses in a three year degree programme. It was a challenge which I decided to meet. I saw my duties as giving the two units a sense of direction, recruiting more dedicated staff, training those on the ground that needed additional training, designing new and relevant courses, and generally raising the academic tone of the discipline consistent with my vision of what African history should strive towards. I was also determined to pursue my own researches very vigorously. These ends were not easy as anyone who has had the privilege and the challenge to build an academic department would readily realise, and I soon realised that nothing kills a scholar faster than academic administration.

Nor was the achievement made any easier by the subsequent events. In January 1967, part of the University administration and certain faculties (including Arts) moved to this campus. Then started the building of this site, in which all those of us who were privileged to be foundation members here participated fully. Ad hoc committees, many of which you will not find in the University Calendar, but which were necessary if things were to move, sprang up in large numbers. Meetings were held into the small hours of the morning. The community was small and the same group of people had to do so many things at the same time. In the midst of the hustle and bustle the ghost of the pre-1966 political wrangling was revived on the campus and imaginary political alignments were dreamt up and concretised. Your place of birth, rather than your contribution, decided whether you were accepted as loyal, suspect or an enemy. Rumour mongers abounded plentifully, bickerings were rife and occasionally intense. All of which complicated our developmental work.

In February 1968, I ceased having responsibility for the Institute of African Studies. However it is satisfying to note that in 1975, the Institute took a great leap forward along the route charted for it between 1965 and 1968, when its various units were created into autonomous academic departments, headed largely by people recruited during those years.

In September 1968, I became the first Professor of History in this University. Since then, apart from short spells spent as Dean of Arts and later as Deputy Vice-Chancellor, I have devoted my time, in co-operation with my colleagues, to recruiting staff, improving and enlarging the curriculum and generally raising the academic standard of the department.

Today the department has 26 academic members of staff, including three professors and seven senior lecturers. We now have thirty-four full year courses covering the histories of Africa, Europe, America and the Middle East. These give students a wide range of choice. In the last session, the department had about 560 students doing many combinations of regular degree courses, and took responsibility for over 2,000 students doing the GNS II: *African History and Culture*. Seven of our former students are now full time academic members of our department, apart from those who are serving in administrative positions inside this University and in academic and administrative positions all over the country. We now have a fully established Graduate School, which last July produced our first Ph.D. Eleven more candidates are now working for various post-graduate degrees and we are poised for a rapid expansion of this number. We have established the Ife History Series, which we hope will open a new chapter in the development of Nigerian historiography. The first volume of this series, written by Dr. Kola Folayan, is expected to be out shortly. We have established a multi-disciplinary research programme for the study of the history and culture of the Yoruba both in West Africa and beyond. Considering the largely unfavourable circumstances within which we have had to work, these are modest but no mean achievements. They have all been accomplished without fanfare or propaganda in the firm belief that a good wine needs no bush, and that empty casks make the most noise.

All of these things have been achieved through the unflinching support of my colleagues, whose distinguishing mark has been a sense of mission and dedication which can hardly be surpassed by any other professional group. Without diminishing the role of the others, I must make particular mention of that small band that had gathered by the beginning of 1967 academic session. They include Dr. Femi Anjorin, Dr. Kola Folayan, Dr. Philip Igbafe, Dr. Segun Osoba, Dr. (now Professor) Banji Akintoye, and Dr. Niyi Ekemode. They shared with me the challenge of nurturing the department and the enthusiasm of working selflessly for a cause. When the going was hard they were steadfast; when the assault was heavy they provided a stout defence; and whenever there was any work to be done in the advancement of the discipline to which we all belong they did not spare themselves. Today, in spite of various personal interests and idiosyncracies, we have a department that is united in its commitment to academic excellence.

With the establishment of a strong department of history and the emergence of a growing academic community in the University, I believe it is time to reflect with you on those philosophies and principles which have guided our teaching and research, and

consider how these principles can continue to be put at the service of the nation.

What then is History? To this question there is not one single answer. History, being an old discipline has passed through different definitions in many ages. However it will broadly be agreed that history is organised critical study of such past activities of human beings as had produced significant effects on subsequent course of events or on other human beings in the course of events. It is not just a study of the past, nor is it an uncritical cataloguing of significant past events. Still less is it a study of all past events. It is analytical and critical in the sense that the historian seeks to understand those significant past events and he interpretes them in the light of his own knowledge of the present. The quality of the work which a historian produces is directly related to his own power of comprehension of the thoughts behind the actions he is studying and to his knowledge of the current events which serves as his base.

Thus a historian who proceeds from the premise that a people about whom he is writing cannot think is unlikely to produce a useful historical analysis. Nor can he produce a rational explanation of the past if he does not grasp the essential developments of the moment. Conversely, what a man chooses to study in the past will be dictated by those things that appear to him to be presently important, either through his reading or from his other primary or secondary knowledge.

This rough and ready definition of history has not been achieved through the study of one generation of thought. Nor is it likely to remain unchallenged. Western historiography has passed through a great many arguments as to the meaning of history, its purpose and its methods. Since Heroditus in the fifth century B.C. first used the Greek word *historia* in its present concept of enquiry into the past, the study of history has passed through a large number of philosophical periods, each of which has left its own mark on the discipline. It is not possible in this short lecture, even if it were desirable, to trace the history of Western historiography. Mention will only be made of a few of the periods in order to show how historiography has grown and hopefully to demonstrate that the debate continues.

From about the beginning of the fourth century A.D. to the end of the Middle ages, Christian thinking dominated the writing of history. Theocracy, the belief that God is ruling the world according to His purpose, was central to historical interpretation. History at that time was conceived not as rational actions of men, but as the working out of God's purpose on earth being carried out, sometime voluntarily at other times blindly, by human beings. History

was going to be fulfilled at some time in the future when God's purpose was complete, and each action of men, ordained by God and voluntarily or involuntarily performed by human beings, was a step towards that fulfilment. As a result of this process of thinking, history became universal, since God's purpose covered the whole world, apocalyptic, since it looked to the future for fulfilment, and periodized, since there was a period when Christ was not known and another when Christ was known, the period of darkness and of light. Indeed it was during this era that Isidore of Seville invented the periods B.C. (Before Christ) and A.D. (Anno Domino) in the year of our Lord.¹

On the other hand, the Renaissance, which immediately followed the middle ages replaced God with man at the centre of historical events even though he remained the Christian man.² Descartes, in the seventeenth century, denied that history had any value at all. He asserted that "those who travel too long end by being strangers in their own homes and those who study curiously the actions of antiquity are ignorant of what is done among ourselves today ... and men who try to model their own acts upon them are prone to the madness of romantic paladins and mediate hyperbolic deeds."³ This kind of attitude produced a very vigorous retort by the practitioners of the profession and they were very loud in pointing out Descartes's philosophical errors. The anti-Cartesians, as they come to be called, insisted that to know the past one must be very firmly rooted in the present and that a knowledge of the past, far from keeping one ignorant of what goes on among us today, indeed enhances an understanding of the present.

Gambatista Vico, one of the most notable figures of this movement went on to lay down what has today been accepted as some of the canons of objectivity in history. Vico's ideas on history and his warnings and injunctions can be profitably repeated today. For instance he warned against the natural tendency of thinking that when similar industries or cultural traits are found in two or more geographical locations, one necessarily derives from the other. Each of the various peoples, he continued, might have similar inventive genius and might have developed independently one from the other. He further reminded us that the knowledge of particular events depended more on application and research than on the mere fact of nearness to the events.

On sources of history, Vico would also appear to sound far more modern than most historians of the present generation. He insisted for instance that history could be learnt not only from written sources but also from linguistic studies, from mythology which can indicate the economic, domestic, and political life of the ancients

and from traditions. He says that "all traditions are true, but none of them mean what they say"⁴. Even today there are still scholars, though diminishing in numbers, who continue to ignore this sane observation of Vico's and to see nothing but confusion in oral sources.

Since Vico, others have also expressed philosophical opinions on the subject of history. Hegel for instance disputed the eschatological view of history and insisted that history ends in the present and not in the future which is an object of hopes and fears, and not actions. Marx sees all the actions of men as being economically motivated and therefore sees economic forces as the main spring of history, since actions of men make history.

There have also been a great many arguments and opinions on what is a historical fact, what is objectivity, and what should be the proper ends of historical study. The point to note here is that these discussions on the problems of history have a long and respectable antiquity and are still going on. Truly, the Yoruba were right in more senses than one when they asserted "*Igba kan ko lo aiyé gbo*" (one generation does not exhaust existence).

Before the colonial period of our history, most African societies had no access to European and world philosophies of history such as we have been discussing. One of the very few advantages that imperialism conferred has been to make these philosophies available to African societies, and thus bring the societies more openly into the main current of world history. Through the academic education given to us at all levels, imperialism sought to make us heirs to a rich historical culture.

At the same time however, the various colonial philosophies denied that Africans were or ever could be part of that main stream of world history. When Hegel said "The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality—all that we call feeling—if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character"⁵, or an Oxford Professor of history asserted that all that ever happened in Africa before the coming of the Europeans were mere "barbarous gyrations", each of them would appear to be expressing this denial by the Europeans of Africans being part of world history. This philosophy has been contested by most African historians since the 1950's and Professor Roland Oliver, in his own inaugural lecture given at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1962 said that such erroneous philosophies arose out of ignorance of the dimensions of human history.

In order, therefore, to dispel further some of the ignorance and increase, however small, the knowledge of the dimension of human

history, perhaps we ought to spend a little more time to examine whether Africans had a notion of history before the coming of the Europeans. We will proceed from the basis that if the Africans had no notion of history before the coming of the Europeans, if all they were involved in were "barbarous gyrations", then they would not advert their minds to the idea of history and its uses. If however the various African nations had their histories of which they were conscious before the coming of the imperialists, then we would normally expect that they would have a notion of what history is and what part it was supposed to play in human affairs. We would thus be able to demonstrate that Africans had contributed to the world thinking on history, as they must have done on other specific issues and subjects, and that a little more attention to these ideas and thoughts would undoubtedly increase the world cultural awareness, if not understanding, and help to re-integrate Africa and Africans into the main current of world historical awareness. For the African historian who has been trained in the western tradition of historiography, and who is no longer sure to which world he belongs, this exercise might also serve to bind his split personality.

What then did Africans think about history and its uses? Because we have not yet arrived at a stage where the philosophies of history as propounded by all African societies can be meaningfully discussed, I shall attempt to answer this question by taking my example of thoughts on history among the Africans from the Yoruba speaking peoples, who have been my special area of study for the last twenty years. When we remember that the Yoruba and their related peoples are to be found, as indigenous populations and in large and influential numbers in four modern West African states, then it will be realised that they constitute a very important portion of Africans inhabiting the West African forest region, and that a study of their thoughts on history pervades a large portion of the African continent.

If we may then put the question more specifically, what did the Yoruba think about history? Perhaps we ought to start to answer the question by looking briefly at the classification of knowledge by the Yoruba. A close study of Yoruba oral literature, both secular and religious, will probably reveal that the Yoruba classified all knowledge into two categories: Knowledge of the spiritual world, which for want of a better word we will call Essences or *Èmi* in Yoruba, and knowledge of the physical world, History, *Itan* in Yoruba, corresponding to their division of the universe into two spheres, heaven and earth, which they call "*igba nla mejì ade isì*" (two large calabashes, one covering the other inextricably). Essences relate to the realm of knowledge associated with heaven, the pantheon of Yoruba gods, and those things that cannot

be observed by the naked eye. In this classification of knowledge will be included, not just theology and worship but also all the subjects now included in the natural sciences. All other knowledge derived from human actions or from actions which human eyes can observe, including all the applied sciences, are classified as History (*Itan*). *Itan* for the Yoruba included what we would now regard as Law, Political Science, Philosophy, Literature, etc. The Yoruba believe that a good understanding of the essences imparts *imọ* which can roughly be translated as knowledge, while a good acquaintance with history bestows *ogbọṣ* — again roughly translated as wisdom.

These two main branches of knowledge are not seen as being in watertight compartments, just as the earth and the sky are not regarded as being unconnected. They are rather linked together in one corpus of knowledge called Ifá. Let me give an example of the combination of the unseen forces of nature (essences) and *Itan* history, from one of Wande Abimbola's collection of Ifá verses:

- Gbogbo ori àfín ewu
 Abuke l'ò r'èru ooṣa ma ṣọ
 Laalaagbaja l'ò ti ko iṣe rẹ dé
 A difa fun Ọrunmila
- 5 Nijọ to nlọ r'ẹmi ọmọ Olodumare ṣ'obinrin:
 Ẹmi, ọmọ Olodumare
 Ọmọ Atẹni lẹgeleḡe f'ori ṣ'apeji
 Ọrunmila gbọ riru ẹbọ, o rú
 O gbọ etu atùkesù, o tù
- 10 O gbọ ikara ẹbọ ha fun un
 O ni aṣé bi ẹmi o ba bọ
 Owo mbẹ
 Hìn hìn, owo mbẹ
 Aṣe b'ẹmi o ha bọ
- 15 Aya mbẹ
 Hìn hìn, aya mbẹ
 Aṣe b'ẹmi o ba bọ
 Ọmọ mbẹ
 Hìn hìn, ọmọ mbẹ
- 20 Aṣe b'ẹmi o ba bọ
 Ire gbogbo mbẹ
 Hìn hìn ire gbogbo mbẹ.⁶

In this piece, the first three lines refer to the forces of nature, (essences) the next seven refer to history i.e. the story of human action, and the next twelve lines refer to the consequences of the combination of the forces of nature and human action. In this particular piece we are told that there was a concurrence between the forces of nature and human action and the result was peace, plenty, and happiness. In other Ifá verses, there may be discordance between

the forces of nature and human actions, then you get chaos. However the point to note here is that the Ifá corpus of knowledge, the greatest single corpus known to the Yoruba, combines religion and history.

Let us now look a little bit more closely at how the Yoruba viewed history. For the Yoruba, *itan* is anything observed and remembered about the actions, voluntary and involuntary, of human beings as well as of his natural environments. Thus *itan*, history, is not just a record of human actions, not just what human beings do. The development of all living objects constitutes history for the Yoruba mind as long as such a development is remembered by human beings. Thus when the Yoruba say “*igi ti o ba ti oju ẹni hu, ko le wo pa ni*” (a tree that grew under one's observation, cannot crush one), they are not denying that the volume or mass or weight of such a tree could be lethal if it fell on one. Rather they are saying that the tree has a history which will be so well known, that one will be able to take precautions against its eventual fall. Or when the Yoruba say “*a kii mọ orukọ iku, ki iku o pa 'ni, a kii mọ orukọ arun ki arun so ni lojọ*” (if one knows the name of death, death does not kill one prematurely, and if one knows the name of disease, it does not confine one) they are saying that death and diseases have their histories which, once known, aid prevention and cure. In other words, inanimate things like trees and diseases also have their histories which, when remembered by human beings, lend them to easier manipulation. This definition of history by the Yoruba is very wide, but it will be agreed that it is very modern, for current approaches to the study of natural phenomena to be harnessed for human use are tending to be historical. Modern scientists are seeking to know the histories and characteristics of these phenomena in order to be able to manipulate them.

Because *itan* was a major branch of knowledge, it had very many sub-branches grouped into it. For example, to the Yoruba, constitutional law, the basis of all orderly relationship and development in any given society was *itan*. Indeed the Yoruba tend to see the constitution of a particular social order as the “beginning” of history or “the origin” of the world. The system of government and the interpersonal relationship laid down at that beginning became the law of the land. The rights, privileges, and responsibilities laid down then must continue to be observed by succeeding generations, which actions became their histories and their claim to continued enjoyment of those rights and responsibilities.

Not only have the Yoruba defined history they have also thought about the nature of history. From the example of the Ifá verse that we saw above, and practically from every Ifá verse, one

would gain the Impression that the Yoruba believed that history repeats itself. The history part of Ifa gives an example of a past event similar to the one confronting the person seeking direction, and then relates the actions performed in that past event with the injunction that the present character should go and do likewise. In other words Ifa tends to show that the same events repeat themselves and can serve as guide to solutions of present problems.

Similar to this view of history is the Yoruba saying "*Aiye nre ibi aarọ*" (the world is going back to the morning period). Here history is seen in terms of the natural phenomenon of a day with its morning, afternoon and evening or night periods. This looks like the cyclical view of history with a period of rise and fall, of darkness and of light separated by a bright afternoon period which can be regarded as the classical period. There is however another saying which shows that the Yoruba also saw history as continuous. "*Aiye nlo a ntọ ọ*" (The world is moving and we are following). This saying may imply that human beings are inexorably following the forces of nature, continuously without an end. On the other hand, "aiye" here may mean the powerful ones of the world rather than natural forces. In that case the whole saying may indicate that the Yoruba believe that it is the mighty ones on earth who shape the course of history, while other puny subjects follow their lead. In both cases, there is the implication here that history is continuous, very similar to Arnold Toynbee's view of history being a seamless garment. These examples should caution us against thinking that the Yoruba had a monolithic view of the nature of history. Further researches may reveal still more views.

Just as the Yoruba had thought about the nature of history, so they had also pondered upon its uses. Foremost among the advantages which the study of history was believed to confer is *ogbon* (wisdom). We commonly hear people say that the only lesson of history is that nobody learns from history. This is a view that the Yoruba did not accept. To them a person who did not or could not learn from history was, not just an *ego* (fool) but an *omugbo* (i.e. someone who makes foolishness his constant drink). To show how highly the Yoruba regarded knowledge of history, *Orunmilà* the epitome of wisdom and knowledge in Yoruba cosmology, is called "*opitan alẹ Ifẹ* (the historian of Ifẹ land). The implication here is that *Orunmilà*'s wisdom is derived, at least in part, from his knowledge of history.

Because of this important advantage which history conferred, one of the major ways of educating a Yoruba child to manhood or womanhood is through *itan*. Every Yoruba boy or girl participated in the usual evening *itan* sessions conducted on clear moonlight nights. Here children were taught the value, the norms

and the ethics of the society, as well as the importance of observation. And when a person attained the highest political office, such as when he became an *Ọba*, he was kept secluded for between fifty-five and seventy days and taught more of the history of his kingdom. It was believed that in this way he would attain greater wisdom, and maintain social and political stability in his kingdom. History is believed to be useful for the solution of day-to-day problems. If there was a chieftaincy tangle or a disagreement over land boundaries, a resort was made to history. Even for such things as soothing an irate child, history was believed to be useful. The Yoruba say, "*bi omode ba ko iyan alẹ agba a fi itan balẹ*. (When a child refuses his evening meal, the elder resorts to historical precedents).

The Yoruba however believe that wisdom is inexhaustible. They assert that passage of time brings greater historical experience and therefore greater wisdom. They say that what is considered absolute wisdom in one age, will after further historical experience be discovered to be but stupidity in another age. This is exemplified in the saying "*ogbori ọjunnì, were emmì* (this year's wisdom is madness next year). This is partly why the Yoruba automatically respect age and experience. Indeed they give ominous warnings to young inexperienced but proud and ambitious men, who parade themselves as being cleverer and wiser than older men, by inviting them to consider history and be wise.

Two sayings will remind us of this warning. The first is "*Bi a l'asọ bi agba a kii ni akisa bi agba*". Literally translated, this means that if one has as many clothes as an older man, one cannot have as many rags. Properly understood, it means that if a cocky young man prides himself of being as knowledgeable of the present as an older person he cannot have as much first hand experience of the past as the older person. The second saying is "*Aṣṣṣe ọp ogómò ti o ni oun o kan ọrun gbongbọn, awon ti o siwaju re se bẹẹ ri?* (The new palm frond boasts that it was going to touch the very heavens, did those before him achieve that?) This saying is sometimes put differently thus, the new palm frond boasts "*mo duro pápápá*" (I stand erect and compact) and the older ones drooping down reply "*o se wa bẹẹ ri* (we once boasted like that!) Consequent upon this belief and attitude the Yoruba encourage young men who are prepared to drink from the fountains of history and learn wisdom. Thus the saying "*omode ti o ba mo ọwọ wẹ, a ba agba jẹun* (a child who knows how to wash his hands properly will eat with the elders).

But because of the inexhaustible nature of wisdom derivable from history, the Yoruba give a warning against an interminable study of the subject. The wiser you are, the more you seek to

know and if you are not careful, you may neglect your material well being. Thus the Yoruba say “*penpe l’aso opitan mo*” (the historian’s dress is short). It is therefore not uncommon to find *babalawo* (Ifa priests) who heed this injunction and bear such oriki as “*akofa mo niwon ola*” (he who studies just enough Ifa for affluence).

The Yoruba have also given a thought to the sources of their history. All of them are oral, since they did not develop any writing before the early decades of the nineteenth century. Everyone knows that some of the sources are repositied in certain institutions such as the *arokin* and *alaro*. What is not often realised is that the sources have also been carefully graded by the Yoruba in such a way that any scholar who is not aware of these gradings is in danger of misinterpreting Yoruba history. Unfortunately most scholars who have worked on Yoruba traditions, whether they are historians or sociologist, have tended to regard the oral sources as monolithic and therefore place equal value on them. Some who have been completely ignorant of the cultural content of the sources they were using have been more confused than enlightened by what they collected.

Perhaps we should spend some time looking at how the Yoruba viewed sources of history. Yoruba sources of history are plentiful and have been enshrined in both human beings and inanimate objects. A name given to a person or an object can serve to remind people of some national historical event. Thus *Abogunde* (born during a war) will continue to remind them of the events of that particular war, and *Ita Ijero* (the place of assembly) will continue to remind one of what that assembly was about. A longer version of this source is the *oriki* and the *orile* usually called praise names or praise poems, the former being descriptive of a particular individual and the latter being ascriptive to a group. I have had occasion to describe the qualities and characteristics of this genre of sources in some other works. Here I want to add that perhaps the most beautiful forms of secular poetry have been inspired by both the *oriki* and the *orile*.

Apart from these, there are the historical sources enshrined in the traditional festivals. Each village, each town, and each kingdom had and still has its cycle of festivals. These festivals contain a large measure of the people’s history, re-enacted annually sometimes in religious drama, sometimes in secular drama. Everyone was involved in one or more of these festivals in any one year.

Then there were those periodic ceremonies associated with the crowning of an oba, or the installation of the chiefs. These only come whenever there was a need, but whenever they occur-

red, an opportunity was taken to remind the people of a significant part of their history. All these sources are in addition to those that are contained in Ifa verses as we noted earlier. They are in addition to those that are related by the *arokin* and *alaro*, all of which put together constitute a very formidable body of evidence.

Earlier on in this lecture, I referred to Vico’s assertion that oral sources do not always mean what they say. To some extent this is true, not only for oral sources but for written ones as well. For every culture develops its own symbolism and idioms and to understand what is being said, one must really be at home in those symbolism and idioms. In the case of Yoruba sources, it is very true of certain categories of sources. Those usual *itan* sessions, to which children were exposed and in which conversations between men and animals or between animals were related, do not exactly mean what they say. They are didactic. They use certain historical events to teach *ogbon* (wisdom) in a way that will appeal to children’s imagination.

Equally conforming to Vico’s observation are those Yoruba narrative traditions recoverable from the *arokin* and *alaro*, which tend to give the stories of origin and political development of a town or a kingdom. These are not didactic but interpretative. The facts of history are narrated in the light of current realities. If those realities change, then the interpretations, though not the facts, also change. Most researchers of Yoruba history and culture are conversant only with this class of already interpreted evidence without realising it and when they find the interpretations changed, they mistakenly conclude that the facts have changed. They therefore go on to draw a more erroneous corollary that oral sources are not trustworthy, when in fact it is those scholars who have not mastered their own tools.

However, there are certain classes of oral tradition which do exactly mean what they say albeit in an abbreviated form since there is a limit to what the human brain can carry. I have had occasions to refer to place names, human names, *oriki* and *orile*. I have also had occasion in this lecture to refer to those re-enactment ceremonies that are associated with the crowning of an *oba*. These, I would contend, mean exactly what they say. The *oriki* is the biography of an individual while an *orile* is, if I might use the term, the biography of a group. Nothing essential is hidden. If the subject of the poem is a brave or cantankerous person, if he is handsome or ugly, if he is honest or roguish, all are narrated and so are his achievements and failures. Anyone reading the *oriki* of Basorun Ogunmola, of Ibadan, or of Ogedengbe Gbogunboro of Ilesa will see these characteristic clearly evinced. In

the case of those re-enactment ceremonies associated with the crowning of *obas* and installation of chiefs the view is taken that the man who would henceforth direct the affairs of the community must get his facts correct whether they are pleasant or not, so that he would not put any foot wrong.

One more point must be made about the treatment of sources by the Yoruba. All sources are living sources and they are tapped fresh each time. The narrator and the listener, as well as the environment, are therefore important factors in what is said and what is left out. More than that the narrator never loses sight of the main objective of history which is to inculcate *ogbon* which must fit the learner into harmonious existence with his environment and his society. Since a peaceful society is a properly integrated society, Yoruba sources of history also tend to be narrated in an integrated form. Successive events are seen as a continuation of, and related to the preceding ones. In a ruling dynasty with five branches, one king is represented as the son of the preceding one, even where they might not be immediately related and even though the successor might indeed be older in actual age than his predecessor.

A recent example will show the value that the Yoruba place on continuity and the integrative role of history. Almost two years ago, the Olubadan assumed the wearing of a crown. The occasion was represented generally as a continuation of a right which had earlier existed. Such an integrative way of relating history, hides without denying the fact of a republican constitution which was born out of the Yoruba revolutionary wars fought between 1797 and 1828, and which was fashioned out in its first forms in Ibadan between 1835 and 1850. A close look at the Ibadan monarchy today will discover its essentially republican nature. We can multiply examples of this method, but I think the point is made that if a scholar must understand the sources that he goes to collect in the field, he must understand the methodology of the people relating the sources to him.

In a single lecture like this, it is certainly not possible to give a complete account of the growth of Yoruba philosophy of history. Nor is it intended to say here that the Yoruba view of history has been the same over the centuries, unchanging and without growth or even disagreement. However by giving these few examples of how the Yoruba saw the subject of history, I have sought to demonstrate three things. First, if any African society, such as the Yoruba, had such views on history as we have been able to show, incomplete as they are presented here, then it is plainly idle, if not incorrigibly ignorant for anyone to continue to insist that the Africans had no history until the coming of the Europeans.

For one does not reflect on something that one does not know intimately. And if the Yoruba can, through their own reflections, show their understanding of the value of history, I have no doubt that other major language groups in Nigeria and Africa would have a few fresh things to teach genuine historians if only the latter would care to learn.

Secondly, I hope I have been able to demonstrate to the modern explorers of the African mind, that the so-called traditional Africans reflected not only on the physical world around them, but also formulated concepts about that physical world. These days, there is an increasing number of pseudo-philosophers all over the African continent, apostles of Hegel, who, following in the tradition of the nineteenth-century European explorers of Africa, now make it their business to explore the African mind. They are neither trained philosophers nor can they converse fluently in any African language. Yet they insist on pronouncing on the quality of the African mind. Little wonder they are coming out with the ridiculous opinion that the African did not engage in second order thought. The apostles of such false scholarship are both white and black and one hopes that such of them as can still be redeemed will learn thoroughly the languages of thought of the people in whom they wish to specialise, and taking this example of Yoruba thought about history, look closely into the second order thought in various aspects of life of the various African societies, before they become the usual proverbial experts on African minds.

Thirdly, and for the purpose of this lecture, most importantly, I hope I have shown that the modern African historian **should** not stop at being just the linear heir of European historiography. If he has learnt his trade properly, he should regard himself as an heir to a double heritage of European and African historiographies. An attitude of mind which regards the colonial and post-colonial era as the only respectable period to write on is not good enough. For when that kind of attitude is adopted, the African historian, far from proving that Africans had their own histories, is only justifying, albeit unwittingly, the erroneous belief that the African nations had no histories before the coming of the Europeans, and that the African can only re-act to the stimuli of the superior (i.e. white) races, but cannot originate his own actions. More than that, the African historian would thereby have deprived himself of the chance to contribute something fresh to the total knowledge of world history and historical methods which will continue to remain incomplete as long as the African portion is not seriously tackled. What the history of historiography has taught is that thinking about the nature and purpose of history

continues and the African thinking on these issues has hardly been highlighted.

There are of course environmental problems militating against original scholarship in African historiography. The first is that the African historian, trained in European traditions with its colonial undertones, finds it difficult to shake off his imbibed notions, which he has come to regard as the basis of his present social status. The second is that oral traditions, being living archives, are far more difficult and require much greater art to collect than written sources. The third is that young African scholars, wanting to make their marks quickly want to publish in what is called "international journals". These are largely foreign journals which naturally would accept only those articles they consider relevant to their own circumstances.

These problems notwithstanding, the African historian of today must see himself as a pioneer who is called upon to justify the opening up of the African world into the main current of world events by seeking to contribute his own original ideas to the total world pool. That, to me, is the only way to be a genuine international scholar. Any other approach will lead to the failure of what we are seeking to achieve, and to the production of histories in which fellow Africans will hardly recognise themselves.

One corollary of what we have been saying is that the teaching and researches of the various departments of history in Nigeria and indeed in all Africa must seek to elucidate the developmental processes of the Africans before and after the colonial period and thus contribute positively to nation building. I am aware that there is a movement which is trying to discourage national histories and to encourage global world history. When national histories become over nationalistic, perhaps there is need for caution. However in most developing countries, and certainly in Nigeria, there is the need now, more than ever before that historians must not lose sight of the service which their discipline can provide to nation building. Baccaria was certainly contradicting himself when he said "happy is the nation whithout a history". For a nation that has no history, has no life and *ipso facto* is not a nation. A nation is not just a mass of territory with recognised boundaries nor is it just a set of economic, constitutional or administrative arrangements, important as these are. A nation is composed of people whose collective soul is their shared experiences. The soul of a nation is its history.

One of the fundamental problems of nation building in Africa is that the colonial territories that emerged as new nations after independence, do not possess a single set of collective experiences. The various groups of varying sizes collected within the modern

nation have their own separate collective experiences. This certainly is true of Nigeria. In other words, the new nations, Nigeria included, have many collective souls, inhabiting one single body politic. Christian theologians will tell us that there can only be one soul in a single body, and where there are more than one, then we are drawing near to a demonic situation.

However, unlike the Christian soul which is infinite, the national soul is finite. It is knowable, it can grow, it can change and of course if not nurtured, it can die. The fact that at independence there were many collective souls of Nigeria, as of any other African country, is one that need not cause despair, once the anomaly is recognised. It is the duty of the African historians to look thoroughly into all the collective experiences of the various peoples in the country and then focus public attention on a viable collective experience, to which the majority, if not all the nationals can relate and with which they can empathize. The colonial experience is of course one such collective experience and the most popular African historians are precisely those who write about this period. But for nation building, this particular experience is barren and hardly constructive and the whole independence movement is witness to the mass rejection of that experience. Indeed the vast majority of Africans cannot recognise themselves on the pages of the African history books that deal with that period. Thus, repeatedly, in spite of the many books that deal with the colonial period, one hears in this country, as in most countries of Africa, the cry of the rulers and ruled alike "give us our history".

Indeed, it is dangerous to hold the colonial period up as the epitome of our collective experience. Colonialism started, proceeded, and ended on the assumption, that the African mind is undeveloped and cannot originate new ideas unless it is prodded from outside and that the African must perpetually remain a child. The institutions that were erected on this belief undoubtedly caused a tremendous amount of dislocation, and the earliest Africans who came into contact with the dislocation spent all their time fighting it in such a way that they did not have any time to proceed on their own path of progress. Colonialism therefore reduced the African only to those who re-act to external stimuli, rather than those who originate, the very position that the imperial philosophy had mapped out for them.

To contribute to nation building, the African historian, and the various departments of history in the African universities, must seek to go behind and beyond the colonial experience. The various collective experiences must be intensively studied with a view towards comparative analysis and final synthesis.

I do not for a moment suggest that such an exercise will be easy or that the methodology for such a synthesis is ready made. However, I have no doubt that it can and should be done successfully.

This is not to say that each single historical event in all of the various cultural areas will be synthesizable with every historical event in the others. However, if we tried seriously enough, we might be able to see that in a large number of cases, we will produce enough collective experience which will then form such a powerful soul of the nation as to withstand any assault either from within or without.

I believe that this is the job that African historians, and the departments of history in the African universities should seriously set themselves to do at this point. To do otherwise is to court disaster. Someone may ask, "Supposing I am a Nigerian writing on Cameroon history, or I am Sierra Leonean writing on Senegal history?" To that the answer is that the framework within which any African history should be written today should be helping the nation, whatever nation, to find its soul. It should be the yardstick against which scholarship is measured. It should be the knowledge to which we all seek to contribute.

So urgent is this now in Nigeria that the Federal Government of Nigeria should consider, as a matter of priority, the establishment of a National Institute of Historical Research. Its duties should be to conduct detailed and intensive research into the various collective experiences of the Nigerian peoples, with a view to synthesizing them. The Institute should not teach or produce students. It should be a pure research centre to which scholars should be encouraged to go for specific researches during a specific period, provided they are willing to contribute to the realisation of its goals. This is only an extension of an existing practice. Today we have all kinds of national research institutes largely designed to provide for the physical body politic, our food, safety and comfort. This call is that we should constitute such a body for the cultivation of the collective consciousness of the nation, without which all the other efforts we are making for the welfare of the nation may not be as fruitful as the amount of money, effort and energy we are expending on them.

Today there is a realisation that the culture of a nation is very important. What is not sufficiently realised is that the dances, the songs, and the visual arts are all products of the collective experiences of the various peoples, products, in other words, of their history. To appreciate them, and be in a position to nurture them, a knowledge of the history that produced them is absolutely indispensable.

Similarly in planning for a very rapid development of any African

nation, a knowledge of its historical antecedents is indispensable. Take for an example the issue of the constitution under which the country will be governed. We had the Westminster model which we discovered did not quite work. So we go further afield and wish to try the Washington model. What is surprising is that rich as this country is in constitutional models, nobody appears to be willing to study them and adapt them for purposes of governing us. All the constitution makers appear to agree to forget anything that may have been pertinent to our historical experience. And yet it appears so obvious that unless the constitution takes into account the collective experience of the people it intends to govern, unless, in other words, it takes their history into consideration, it will be hardly workable.

Take another example—the need to produce enough food to feed the growing population of this country. It is generally agreed among the policymakers that all you need is to change the primitive, that is traditional, farming methods into scientific, meaning foreign method. What is completely overlooked is that agriculture as traditionally practised is a product of centuries old experimentation based on a fairly accurate knowledge of soil and weather conditions. It is, scientific agriculture in its own right. To improve the standard and increase productivity, a history of the development of traditional agriculture is imperative. To assume that there is no such history and proceed to just want to change to something foreign is to court disaster.

Take also the need for technological development. When we talk of developing countries, or underdeveloped countries or the third world, we are referring invariably to those countries whose technological development is low. The governments of those countries are therefore committed, in various degrees of seriousness, to rapid technological development. What many of those countries, Nigeria included, forget is that technology is not dropped from heaven. It is a product of historical processes and a common collective experience. Nor can it be easily and quickly transferred except there is a base on which it can rest, or stem to which it can be grafted.

Therefore, if we want a rapid technological advancement in this country, we should look into the history of our technological growth and build from there. So far, the impression one gets is that none of the planners places any particular premium on such a history. Indeed they seem to be anxious to destroy such a base as exists, in the erroneous belief that it is primitive and they then hope that after that destruction, they can bring in modern, advanced, sophisticated technology. Look at what is happening to all our traditional industries—iron smelting

and works, soap making, beer and spirits brewing, the making of dyes and paints, boat-building, cosmetics etc. They are all being systematically dubbed as primitive and destroyed. Anyone who advocates that a serious attention be paid to them stands a chance of being ridiculed by the modern technocrats. Yet, a century ago the peoples of this country had all their basic needs supplied by themselves through that technology and such innovation as they were able to think out. Today, the modern technologists cannot guarantee these basic needs in this land of plenty. Most Nigerians will be shocked to hear that in this day and age, we are importing sand from Australia, and earthworms from Europe. Unless we look into our past and take our traditional base seriously, there is very little hope of a real technological advancement. This apparently conservative stand is, in my view, the only true road to a quick industrial revolution.

We could go on to cite examples of how a serious attention to the study of our history will aid various aspects of our economic and social progress. We should not be misunderstood. No one is saying that the country should revert to the position it was one or two centuries ago, nor even fifty years ago. What we are saying is that the historical precedents of whatever action we are taking now should be properly studied and understood and then should become the basis of our forward movement in any national endeavour. In our case, and in the case of most ex-colonial territories the need is very real because our colonial experience has almost successfully cut us off from our roots. To be impatient with history is to sow a seed of failure in our endeavours. Certainly the various departments of history in Nigeria and Africa should not fold their arms and wait until they are asked to tackle these problems. They should blaze the trail and expand their research interest to go beyond the traditional political and economic topics. And should anyone say to me that "people never learn from history", I shall reply with the Yoruba proverb that says "ẹgọ enia ni'pe ẹnu baba oun nrun" (he is a thoroughly stupid man who says his grandfather's mouth is smelling and would therefore not listen to his words.) And as the Yoruba also say, nothing kills a man or a nation faster than stupidity.

Vice-Chancellor, I like to conclude by re-iterating the key points in this address. Africans not only had worthy histories, but also reflected on the nature and purpose of history before the arrival of the Europeans into our midst. This reflection, if headed and properly studied, can add to the total world pool of historical knowledge. An African historian should see therefore himself as drinking from the fountains of knowledge of the Western world and of his own African heritage. It is only in such a position that

he will be able to contribute to the totality of world historical knowledge for which his training was meant to equip him. It is only in such a way that he will be useful to the society he wishes to serve. Consequently the departments of history in the various universities should be organised in such a way as to produce scholars who will be so useful. Secondly, the governments and planners of Nigeria, and of all the developing countries, should realise that in all the efforts for rapid constitutional, economic, technological and social advancement, relevant historical precedents of the peoples concerned should be given serious consideration.

ENDNOTES

1. R.G. Collinwood, *The Idea of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 46-56.
2. Collinwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 57.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 63-72.
5. G.W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 93.
6. Wande Abimbola, *Ijinle Ohun Enu Ifa Apa Kini* (London: Williams Collins, 1968), p. 21.