

## **APPLYING HISTORY: TOWARDS A RESPONSIVE WRITING**

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This article discusses African historiography with an emphasis on Nigeria. It posits that the themes in African historiography have continued to evolve, with historians of different eras paying attention to a broad spectrum of issues. The need at one point was to recall the glory of Africa's past, and to debunk Eurocentric bias and prejudice by early European writers of African history was a central theme in historical research on the continent. Thus, it was employed to address pressing issues of nationalism and to combat Afro-pessimism. The article suggests that contemporary historians can use historical writing to understand, analyse, and make recommendations for policymakers in Africa in such areas as governance, trade, and bilateral relations. Looking at contemporary issues, it has become clear that today's historians can do more to contribute to finding solutions to some of the current challenges in different African communities.

### **INTRODUCTION**

African historiography has gone through different stages, reflecting the respective mindsets and priorities of the historians of each era. While the trends in African historical writing have been covered in a multitude of studies (Asiwaju 1974; Ki-Zerbo 1995; Mader 2015), a brief overview is helpful here.<sup>1</sup> During the pre-colonial era, the major focus of African oral tradition was on great personalities and important events, which were often codified in songs, proverbial sayings, and tales (Murtala 2021). There were also written materials by different scholars from a variety of backgrounds, either in Arabic or in other languages. In the colonial era, more emphasis was placed on using historical knowledge as an emancipating tool. With the shift to the post-colonial era, and beginning with the era of African renaissance,<sup>2</sup> more emphasis was placed on the glorification of Africa's past, continued debunking of Eurocentrism, and a focus on Pan-Africanism and nationalism as new themes in the writing of African history. Broadly, this era can be identified as an era of "reactive" historiography. Due to that fact, African historiography during this era largely sought to raise awareness around the need for political and social freedom, because these were the current necessities, and digging into the past to

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2 The African renaissance can be said to have been vigorously conceptualized by Cheikh Anta Diop. His book *Towards the African Renaissance: Essays in African Culture and Development, 1946–1960* consists of several essays on the culture(s) of Africa and development.



find confidence to combat the prevalent problems of the present is one of the essentials of historical knowledge and historical writing. In the words of Adeniji Abolade (2021: 6), “during the period of the struggle for independence, history came [in] handy as an ideological tool to imbue Nigerians with the needed confidence in taking on the colonials”.

In 1970, the new African historiography<sup>3</sup> adopted the political philosophy of the prevalent African nationalism of the period (Denoon & Kuper 1970). As far as African historiography and scholarship were concerned, Ochwada Hannington (2003) has identified three centres of historical academic debate at the tail end of 1950s and early 1960: Cheikh Diop, the University of Dakar, and the Ibadan nationalist schools, with their historical writing largely focusing on resistance against Eurocentric narratives. Demonstrating through their research that Africans actively contributed to their own civilization against prevalent Eurocentric biases, they strove to provide a basis for Africans to find pride in their past achievements (Whitfield & Ibhawoh 2005). As explained by Funso Afolayan (2005: 1), “with decolonization and independence came the era of nationalist and liberalist historiography which rejected the notion of a barbaric and static Africa ‘without history’”. Accordingly, the historians of this period sought to re-assert the contributions of Africa to different areas of humanity while debunking the Afro-pessimism of European writers, including Hegel,<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Moseley,<sup>5</sup> Arthur P. Newton,<sup>6</sup> Trevor Roper,<sup>7</sup> and others, while promoting ideologies such as *Ujamaa* and *Negritude*.

Having briefly identified the turn in African historical research, the argument for the current article is that African historical research can be used to a new end, to find a solution to contemporary challenges just as it was adopted by early writers to address the challenges of their own period. The attempt here is not to criticize the early themes in African historical writing but to highlight the need to make historical writing responsive to the contemporary needs of society. African historiography has done a lot to address the prejudices in the writing of African history by early European authors, but what is imperative now is to shift our focus to foundational issues of the past, in order to understand and find answers to the socio-political challenges Africa faces in the present. As suggested by Hannington (2003), “African historians should delve into the African past in order to bring to fore the knowledge that could be used to reju-

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3 For a counter-argument, see Ranger 1971. For a rejoinder and response to this, see Denoon & Kuper 1971.

4 In one of his lectures delivered in 1831, W.F. Hegel divided the world into two groups: those who have contributed to humanity and those who have contributed nothing. According to Hegel, Africa belonged to the second group. He stressed: “Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained – for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World – shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself – the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night [...] 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” (Hegel 1831: 110–111).

5 This European medical doctor argued that “Africans bear surgical pains much better than white people “and what would be the cause of insupportable pain to a white man, a Negro would almost disregard. I have amputated the legs of many Negroes, who have held the upper part of the limb themselves” (Moseley 1795: 475).

6 Arthur P. Newton (1923: 3) argued that “history begins when men take to writing”. In other words, societies that have not perfected their arts of writing have no history. This conception of history has been used by imperialists to justify their claim that the pre-literate African continent had no history until their advent. However, each group had its own way of keeping records.

7 Trevor Roper, a celebrated historian (of British origin), portends that “there is nothing to write about Africa”. He further stresses that “perhaps, there could be a history of Africa in the future”. In other words, Africa has no past or history worthy of notice. As quoted in Lulat (2005), he writes, “there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history.”

venate socio-political and economic institutions of the continent.” To quote Professor Jamiu Oluwatoki, our focus should be to “galvanise the present and future generations of Africans to ‘Africreate’ and spur them out of their lethargy and inferiority complex” (Adewumi 2021: 71).

### **CHARTING A NEW COURSE: THE NEED FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT**

It is appropriate to take a clue from Nyerere’s (1968) assertion that “the citizens of Africa should be able to indicate where our needs for historical knowledge press most heavily upon us”. Comfortably, we can posit that, under-development, incessant socio-political, and ethnic conflicts press most heavily against us today and as a result, deserve a great deal of attention in African historical writing since that is one of the bases for historical knowledge, and it is the duty of professional historians than any other group of individuals to draw experience and inspiration from the past because “history studies the past as a window on the present to enable us project thoughtfully into the future” (Adewumi 2021: 58). A clearer clarion call can be discerned from Ajayi (1995: 41) in his point that “the nation is shaped by the effort of historians, among others, who try to establish the history of the nation, influence its group memory”.

The type of history we write as historians has a tremendous impact on the mindsets and understanding of the people who are policymakers or who may become one tomorrow. Historians are not just writers; they create a sense of belonging, a sense of tradition, and a bond between individuals and their past societies, including their configurations, achievements, and glories as well as the dark sides to be avoided in both the present and the future. Citing post-independent Zimbabwe as an example, Frances Stewart (2002: 1) has described that political leaders may intentionally distort or rewrite “historical memories to engender or strengthen collective identity in the competition for power and resources” at the expense of other groups. Consequently, political leaders and historians can also engender or strengthen peaceful co-existence for national growth as against instigating tribal conflicts. As such, historical research should be tailored towards effecting progressive changes.

### **HISTORICAL FRAMES FOR INSTITUTIONAL DESIGNS**

#### ***Legal institutions***

Institutions, both formal and informal, represent channels that shape the activities of humans within their environments. Institutions represent a critical part of different societies (Friel 2017), and they can be a product of long history from within the societies where they are adopted (evolutionary) or superimposed by external agents. In most African communities, some post-colonial institutions represent an enduring feature of European norms that were superimposed (by the way of coercive isomorphism) on the existing traditional systems that had evolved and carried different African civilizations for thousands of years. The importing and adoption of foreign institutions arguably represents a type of mimetic isomorphism. The adoption of foreign models, however, has come with mixed results – in the form of fine adaptations in some cases and disastrous consequences in others.

For example, to understand why there are sometimes tensions around legal institutions and differing attitudes towards customary laws, a historical understanding of the social environ-

ment in some Nigerian societies could be of help. While sharia law<sup>8</sup> is deeply rooted in the pre-colonial tradition of the northern states in Nigeria as a form of customary law, the view regarding customary laws is slightly different in the eastern part of the country. Such differences regarding the eastern part of Nigeria were visible during the Biafra war:

Customary and native courts, which city dwellers had come to see as a moribund and despotic part of the legal system, were especially unpopular in the east. There, the common experience of being caught up in other peoples' customary legal systems (especially in the north) made many in the east hostile toward the general idea of custom – even if it was one's "own." By the time Biafra seceded, the jurisdiction of customary courts in the east was restricted to a few matters of family law and chiefly succession. (Daly 2020: 74–75)

Thus, in trying to understand the basis for legal pluralism in Nigeria, it is important to take a historical look at the distinctions in the history and society of the Hausa northern states compared to the Igbo-dominated eastern region in the country. As observed by a researcher describing the Nigerian situation:

Perhaps the most important expression of legal pluralism in the country [...] English style law (common law), Islamic law, and customary law<sup>9</sup> apply variously. These three types of law correspond broadly though not exactly to the three religious groupings. These have not co-existed in harmony and the experience has been one of tensions and conflicts. (Oba 2002: 3)

Consequently, tussles between those wanting a Federal Sharia Court of Appeal presided over by a national Mufti and those with opposing views have led to political backlashes and social tensions (Oba 2002). As a result of culturally embedded differences coupled with political permutations by elites (Afis 2019), it is not uncommon that there have been accusations of the "Islamization" of Nigeria (Ele 2018) each time there are cases in which there arises a suggestion to adopt a seemingly severe form of sharia law in the north or in legal other cases. The claims and counterclaims by different observers often sideline the significance of historical precedence in these places, thereby leading to more tension in the mold of "my way or the highway".

Among the Yoruba people, the basis for legal pluralism has also been noticed by different researchers who pointed to the existence of sharia in some areas (Raifu 2016). Consequently, we can stress that the institutions that deal with legal systems in the country must do more to look at the embedded history of the traditional laws and the conflicting legal pathways and how from time to time they continue to be sensitive topics (Laitin 1982). Hence, national development plans should consider historical and cultural peculiarities in a country of nations (that is, different national groups) as a way towards creating functional institutions. Writing about Nigeria, Audu and Samuel (2014) have aptly identified the importance of historical knowledge as a vehicle for national development. They contend that "in planning, antecedents are indispensable":

For example, the issue of the constitution under which the country would be governed has been an issue that has generated a lot of heat. We continued to experiment with different models from American or elsewhere, yet most of our experiments have not quite worked well. Unless the constitution takes into account the collective experiences and historical antecedents of the people it intends to govern, rapid development would continue to elude Nigeria. (Audu & Samuel 2014: 5)

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8 Some African scholars consider sharia to be a form of mimetic institution, while others may have a different opinion, since it was not imposed by colonial force in northern Nigeria.

9 Sharia has also been adopted as a form of criminal law in parts of the country. See *BBC News* 2002.

### ***Conflict resolution***

The incessant clashes between nomadic cattle herders and sedentary farmers could be avoided based on known pre-colonial struggles especially if the government proactively engages with historians and national defense planners or strategists on the same subject. For example, the federal government under Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari has suggested that colonial gazettes could help to justify and understand whether there were grazing routes that the colonial administration established, in order to find legal backing for herders (Akinwunmi 2021; Ndujihe et al. 2021; *Sun News Online* 2021; Aborisade et al. 2021). However, beyond the colonially imposed gazettes, it is equally important to understand the history of ethnic relations between the nomadic herders and the sedentary farmers. Here, social historians, political historians, and economic historians have a lot to contribute. As such, a proper understanding of the political and social policies in Nigeria – and other African states – should take cognizance of the history of the peoples involved, as well as their pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial tensions or general relationships. The complexities of inter-tribal conflicts in some African societies can also be understood through the application of historical knowledge, which can illuminate traditions and values that are either complementary or contradictory in a segmented society. As a result, the system of government (such as federalism, a unitary system, or the creation of political units) that is suitable for a post-colonial African state may be understood or engineered through the shared ethnic history in such states. Knowing that the natural law of any society is grounded in either tradition (custom) or religion, as Muammar al-Gaddafi ([1975] 2016) stated, we can through historical knowledge form a popular platform for mutual understanding among diverse African groups and minimize the outbreak of ethnically engineered armed conflicts, including those rooted in pre-colonial tensions. To corroborate the need for re-asserting and upholding African institutions in the areas of conflict prevention and resolution, some of which were rendered as mere facades by colonial governments and a contemporary state system which rely on force to ensure compliance, it has been suggested that “traditional institutions had authority and legitimacy that post-colonial African governments are yet to attain. Clearly one of the effective means of capturing the minds of many Africans is to work through their traditional institutions” (Thovoethin & Akpotu 2021: 15). Thus, it has been recommended that the historical positions of old traditional institutions make them relevant for peace-building in Africa.

### ***Economic history and development***

Economic history which deals with the understanding of economic activities and events of the past, and development studies as it relates to contemporary economic studies, can be harnessed to comprehend issues of development and policies: “Once economic history and economic development are seen as two sides of the same coin, there should be interesting cross fertilization between economic historians and development economists” (Temin 2014: 17). As alluded to by Nathan Nunn (2009: 67), there is empirical evidence that history matters in the understanding of economic development, because “the institutions of a society are an important determinant of long-term economic development and that historical events can be an important determinant of the evolution and long-term persistence of domestic institutions”.

Consequently, an understanding of Nigeria's business history and the peculiarities of the Nigerian business environment would aid the relevant agencies in formulating policies that would

boost Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Nigeria as well as across the continent. For example, the institution of *Èsúsú* or *Àjò*, which is common in Nigeria, can give insights into the acceptability of credit institutions and its usefulness. While it can be difficult to precisely date its origin, the institution of Esusu is one of the earliest financial institutions on the continent, dating back to the sixteenth century. Today, it still enjoys wide usage in the informal sector among the Yoruba people and beyond (Seibel 2004). To illustrate the need to further strengthen indigenous systems for economic development, the Igbo apprenticeship system, famously described as “as the largest business incubator in the world” (Neuwirth 2017), is largely rooted in that people’s social environment. Its usefulness is apparent when we consider that it has contributed to making “the Igbo nation a relative stable community in Nigeria” (Ekekwe 2021). In the northern part of Nigeria, where there is a natural inclination towards compliance with sharia, the establishment of the Jaiz Bank’s first three branches in Abuja, Kaduna, and Kano (*Premium Times Nigeria* 2022) is not an accident, and its appeal to Muslims around the country has to do with the institution’s compliance with Islamic norms being deeply rooted in the socio-historical norms of the north (and other parts of the country, to varying degrees). Again, history matters.

Why certain institutions and policies have failed in parts of Africa and succeeded elsewhere in the world may best be understood in terms of the differences in socio-political and economic history. Each society’s present is deeply rooted in the past, and the future is a continuous interaction between the past and the present. As such, examining the historical peculiarity of each society is an essential guide in creating functional institutions that are relevant to the needs of the people. After all, the traditions or customs and organizational structure and fabric that make up a society are the results of a deep-rooted development process, which can be grasped through history.

### ***Inter-state relations***

At the international level, a proper understanding of the historical dynamics of the past through historical writings can help create a systemic diplomatic framework, institutions, and policies for socio-political and economic development on the continent. It may also illuminate contemporary issues. For example, an understanding of the contemporary relationship between sub-Saharan Africa, on one hand, and Northern Africa (and Egypt), on the other, can be quickly grasped in terms of age-old Afro-Arab relations, trans-Saharan trade, and other factors. At a time when China is rising and using the tag of the “new Silk Road” as a sign of the country’s new ambition, a new trans-Saharan trade route, if well-structured and “packaged”, could reinforce and boost trade across the continent. One of the selling points in the drive for the new Silk Road can be gleaned from the words of Xi Jinping, whose speech contained a historical frame on the relationship between China and the rest of the countries concerned:

Over 2,000 years ago, our ancestors, trekking across vast steppes and deserts, opened the transcontinental passage connecting Asia, Europe and Africa, known today as the Silk Road. Our ancestors, navigating rough seas, created sea routes linking the East with the West, namely, the maritime Silk Road. These ancient silk routes opened windows of friendly engagement among nations, adding a splendid chapter to the history of human progress. The thousand-year-old “gilt bronze silkworm” displayed at China’s Shaanxi History Museum and the Belitung shipwreck discovered in Indonesia bear witness to this exciting period of history. (Xi 2017)

The quote above reveals how the Chinese government carefully highlighted the historic position of the old Silk Road to underline the contemporary relevance of the new Silk Road, in order to encourage and foster closer economic ties with Indonesia.

The relationship between the Yoruba people of Southwestern Nigeria with the people of Benin, for example, goes beyond contemporary cross-border trade. In fact, it was deeply rooted in pre-colonial relations, and the success or failure of trade policies (especially border closures) and diplomatic relations between the two states may depend on cognizance of this fact. Thus, it has been stated that “nationality is a secondary issue to clan or ethnic solidarity [...] informal trading [activity] is a form of bonding or solidarity between people separated by artificial colonial boundaries” (Aremu & Saibu 2022: 10). Another practical illustration of historical ties being leveraged in issues related to inter-state relations is the solidarity of those notable Yoruba individuals that weighed in and applied their influence to the diplomatic situation caused by the arrest of Sunday Igboho in Benin and the request for his extradition by the federal government. While the federal government through the Department of State Security (DSS) sought to ensure his extradition, notable Yoruba individuals and kings tried to leverage the pre-colonial relationship between the Yoruba (old Oyo kingdom) and the Beninoise (Ajase) (*BBC News Pidgin* 2021; Sodiq, 2021).

In a similar vein, the contemporary relationship between Nigeria and the Republic of the Niger, and especially how some Hausa leaders and other Muslims sought to condemn the possibility of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) invasion after the July 2023 *coup d'état*, can be understood through the timeline of the pre-colonial period and contemporary relations between the Hausa people of the two states. The prospects and challenges of sub-regional integration, such as the ECOWAS, can also be conceptualized through extensive historical research to respond positively to the challenges in the region, since history not only tells us about the past but also prepares us for the future. The recent stand-off and diplomatic tension among the countries close to the Nile River, especially Egypt and Ethiopia, may be comprehended not only in terms of the contemporary international framework but also through the historical relationship between those two countries (Yihun 2014). A viable solution must also atone for whatever historical injustices remain in place.

### ***Education and curriculum***

The recent wave of xenophobic attacks in South Africa, in which foreigners, Africans, and non-Africans of different nationalities lost their lives and assets to South African mobs, can be understood through the lens of history but also anticipated and possibly addressed by a careful application of the principle of *Ubuntu* in the education system, in order to salvage the future generations (Ojedokun 2015). Amodu Akeem (2019: 4) has stressed that “Negritude and Ujamaa resemble, in content and character, the humanist philosophy of the South African Ubuntuism”. Thus, in Africa there exist traditional morals or beliefs and practices, which can be harnessed in the education system for social progress. Others have stressed that the focus should be on propagating ideas that help to reinforce harmony in various post-independent African states where ethnic tensions have been demonstrated to be destructive. Accordingly, Onebunne (2018: 1) has suggested that “Egbe Bere Ugo Bere, ‘Let the Kite perch, let the Eagle perch’, and UBUNTU are concepts of co-existence and human relational interaction in African traditional society and setting” that can be used to address social problems. To gain an idea of how to reconstruct a peaceful society, battered

for centuries by colonial imposition that eroded part of the traditional system, it is important to comprehend the importance of education and politics.

As far as the politics of knowledge goes, the community at the state level or within all tiers can leverage their legitimate position to plant ideas of inter-communal respect for different local norms that encourage unity and to determine the appropriate value in their education system (Apple 2003; Leach & Scoones 2007). A carefully designed curricular system which introduces these ideas and concepts of harmony and peaceful co-existence into the teaching system of different schools can be seminal for future generations of Africans to receive a culture of tolerance as part of their civic education. In Ethiopia, a study published in 2016 has shown that “civic and ethical education has contributed to building ethical behaviour and creating active citizens who are aware of their rights and duties, the duties of the government, and the overall political life of their country” (Bayeh 2016: 6). In Nigeria, it has been argued that “there is need for a responsive curriculum that is flexible and dynamic enough to drive the society on the path of growth and development” (Lukman & Audu 2014: 2).

The multi-disciplinary approach to civic education will allow for innovative collaboration between historians and experts in education sciences for national development (Egbefo 2014). As suggested by Audu and Samuel (2014: 3), if Nigeria is to survive and thrive – and the same applies to other African countries where ethnic tension is rife – it “needs a patriot of divine inspiration who would help carry an ideology of national development beyond ethnic boundaries”. This should be done in a way that allows different groups to thrive for national development without recurring threats of domination from others.

## CONCLUSION

I have attempted to explain the relevance of historical knowledge for policy formulation using “responsive historical writing as a concept”. In short, it is imperative that we point out how and where “historiography” and “historical knowledge” can help solve contemporary challenges that bedevil some societies in Africa, offering applicable practical recommendations. By highlighting trends in African historiography, this article acknowledges the activities of previous scholars and writers of African history but also calls for a more robust application of historical writing to the contemporary challenges on the continent.

A responsive historiography seeks to address contemporary problems through historical writing in a fruitful manner to combat underdevelopment, inter-ethnic crises, and xenophobia, and also support national socio-economic and political development. Policymakers stand to significantly benefit from historical knowledge, but historians must supply them with ample information. Historical tools will be found useful in addressing future problems, but the historians going forward must be trained to deal with the issues of their time. Accordingly, we can appreciate the view of Frantz Fanon (1963: 84) that “during the colonial period the people are called upon to fight against oppression; after national liberation, they are called upon to fight against poverty, illiteracy, and underdevelopment”, for he concludes, “the struggle, they say, goes on. The people realize that life is an unending contest.”

By a way of analysis, this article has called for a more judicious use of historical writing and knowledge to understand and solve the contemporary challenges that bedevil Africa, and yet it also acknowledges recent attempts by different institutions of learning to address this gap. One such step was the 2015 conference held by the University of Lagos during the leadership of Professor Olufunke Adeboye (History) with the theme “History and Nation Building”, where



different academics presented papers on national issues in Nigeria. At the conference, I was able to witness how different issues of history and nation-building were practically discussed. Activities like this represent the first step in a two-step scenario. The second step, I would argue, depends on policymakers adopting insights from historians and recommendations by other experts concerning national plans at all levels. In this manner, our applied history will come full circle. The importance of historical knowledge for nation-building – and, in fact, inter-state interaction in Africa in terms of development, national and international policies, regional integration, and cultural disposition – is enormous. While a work of this nature can only raise a few examples, it nonetheless shines light on directions for future work.

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