

## Rethinking the Nexus between History & Scientific Knowledge: Speaking Truth to 'Power' and the People of Nigeria

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### Abstract

It is evident that the global village is highly characterized with scientific innovations such as breakthroughs in automobile, space travels, medicine, nuclear weapons, inter-ballistic missiles, television, ipads, ipods, palm tops, proliferation of the Social Media network (Facebook, Twitter, etc) and a host of others. Arguably, this innovativeness seems not to have direct interconnectedness with history. To put it more aptly, these scientific products are invariably not the products of the practitioners of history. Consequently, in Nigeria, this had affected the way the generality of the people view history as a discipline. Not surprisingly, admission into the departments of history had been nose-diving, despite concerted efforts to make the discipline more attractive to proposed undergraduates. Evidently, calculated apathy and inferior complex have been built around the discipline. Thus, the fortune of history as a discipline is declining and its survival is being endangered. Reportedly, some educational policy makers in Nigeria have suggested scraping history as a subject in the Nigerian secondary schools and subsequently, this had watered down historical scholarship at the tertiary level. The argument is that, Nigeria as a developing nation, must embrace technical and technological courses if it must attain development. Plausibly, this argument is not tenable.

Fundamentally, this paper attempts a censorious look into the interconnectedness between History and Science. The position of this paper is that history is scientific in nature; hence it contributes to scientific knowledge. Therefore, history, as well as other courses in humanities must not be neglected. In fact, if Nigeria, and other African countries want to trace their paths to technological breakthroughs and innovation, history is one of the disciplines that must be taken critically both by the people and the governments.

### Introduction:

*"To those who pose the question, what is the use of history? The crispest and most enlightening reply is to suggest that they try to imagine what everyday life would be in a society in which no one knew history. Imagination boggles, because it is through knowledge of its history that a society can have knowledge of itself"- Arthur Marwick<sup>1</sup>*

While receiving my training in history as an undergraduate at the prestigious department of history of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife; I have been either directly or indirectly asked fundamental questions such as: What can you do with history? What is the nature of history? What can history do, and cannot do? To the ordinary common-sense mortal, the most striking difference between history and natural science is the degree to which proof can be established of the various contentions made by the scientist and the historian respectively.<sup>2</sup>

It is evident that the global village is highly characterized with scientific innovations such as breakthroughs in automobile, space travels, medicine, nuclear weapons, inter-ballistic missiles, television, ipads, ipods, palm tops, proliferation of the Social Media network (Facebook, Twitter, etc) and a host of others. Arguably, this innovativeness seems not to have direct interconnectedness with history. To put it more appositely, these scientific products are invariably not the products of the practitioners of history. Consequently, in Nigeria, this had affected the way the generality of the people view history as a discipline. Not surprisingly, admission into the departments of history had been plummeting, despite concerted efforts<sup>3</sup> to make the discipline more attractive to proposed undergraduates.

Evidently, calculated apathy and inferior complex have been built around the discipline. According to Adesoji, until recently, various actions and inactions of government and people, whether at the level of policy formulation or implementation, have had the cumulative effects of discouraging the study of history in the nation's educational institutions.<sup>4</sup> Reportedly, some educational policy makers in Nigeria have suggested scraping history as a subject in the Nigerian secondary schools and subsequently, this had watered down historical scholarship at the tertiary level. This is reflected in the ratio of admission between Science-based and Humanities-based courses into higher institutions in Nigeria. According to Adesina, the ratio of admission into

<sup>1</sup> Marwick, A. (1984), *The Nature of history*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Marwick (ed), *'The Nature of History'*, (London: Macmillan 1976)

<sup>3</sup> To read about the various efforts see: Adesina, O.C. (2006), *Teaching history in twentieth century Nigeria: The challenge of change*. *History in Africa* 33, 25-31; Adesoji, A.O., 'Historical Scholarship in 20th Century Nigeria: The Quest for Relevance', *The African Symposium*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Dec. 2009; Prof. Siyan Oyeweso, *The Undertakers, The Pythons, and Footsteps of the Ants: The Historian's Burden*, 22nd Inaugural Lecture, Lagos State University, Nigeria, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Adesoji, A.O., 'Historical Scholarship in 20th Century Nigeria: The Quest for Relevance', *The African Symposium*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Dec. 2009.

the science and non-science based courses in Nigerian Universities was put at 60:40.<sup>1</sup> The argument is that, Nigeria as a developing nation, must embrace technical and technological courses if it must attain development. Plausibly, this argument is not tenable. Adesina corroborates this position that the Nigerian government in aligning the country's educational curriculum with her development needs have always been informed by an uneducated notion that certain courses, History inclusive are irrelevant to the country's needs.<sup>2</sup>

Without mincing words, there is no doubt about whether the pure sciences (Physics, Biology, Chemistry, etc) contribute to scientific knowledge. Hence, this paper shall do a critique of this assertion that: History contributes little or nothing to scientific knowledge. In an attempt to do this, this paper shall first considers what is scientific knowledge in order to assert that History as a discipline contributes to scientific knowledge and thereafter see to the extent at which History contributes to scientific or rational knowledge.

### **Conceptual Definitions**

*"... natural science as a form of thought exists and has existed in a context of history, and depends on historical thought for its existence. From this it can be inferred that no one can understand natural science unless he understands history: and no one can answer the question of what nature is unless he knows what history is."*<sup>3</sup>

*"To advocate that studies in 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..."*<sup>4</sup>

Knowledge can be referred to as information in mind: general awareness or possession of information, facts, ideas, truths, or principles.<sup>5</sup> Rationality deals with the condition in which values, beliefs, and techniques are believed to be based on logical and understandable principles.<sup>6</sup> Oxford dictionary defines science as a systematically organized body of knowledge about a particular subject. For a thing to be scientific, such a thing must be systematic, methodical, well organized, ordered, meticulous, rigorous, exact, precise, accurate, and rational.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, scientific knowledge could be described as information based on knowledge and understanding that is highly systematic, well thought-out, structured, logical, intelligent, far-sighted, a matter-of-fact and sensible. Hence, for the purpose of this paper, Scientific or Rational Knowledge shall be construed to be information and understanding that is systematic, organized, logical, intelligent, sound, prudent, and pragmatic.

### **Binary Representations: The Burden of History as a Discipline**

Evidently, there is no contestation that history can be categorized as an arts course/subject. However, the binary challenge facing history as a discipline is the contested categorization of history as an arts course, as well as a science course, particularly among professional historians. In fact, this had created a scholarship dichotomy among professional historians. Arguably, that history is scientific or not is a terminological question. Paradoxically, this terminological question is an eccentricity of the English language. In every other European language, the equivalent word to 'science' includes history without hesitation.<sup>8</sup>

Whereas, history is not scientific as the physical sciences like Physics, Chemistry, Biology, etc. Arguably; predictability, certitude and other attributes obtainable in the physical sciences are not obtainable in history, notwithstanding; it has been argued that the historian is also involved in the use of scientific methodologies such as hypothesis, collection of data, generalization, etc. Thus, the argument is that these distinct characterizations (hypothesis, collection of data, generalization, etc) which are also inherent in historical methodologies are the basis of science. This was the view J.S. Bury evidently had in mind when, in the closing words of his inaugural lecture of January 1903, when he described history as 'a science, no more and no less'.<sup>9</sup> Hence, history can be considered to be scientific in nature.

Thus, historians such as W. H. Walsh had argued that history should be considered as a science<sup>10</sup> while others such as E.H. Carr had argued that history is a not a science, or a perfect science,<sup>11</sup> especially since history cannot attain predictability as achievable in the physical sciences. This had spurred great debate amongst historians and indeed this debate will range on. In fact, some scholars had declared that history is both science

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1 Adesina, O.C. (2006), Teaching history in twentieth century Nigeria: The challenge of change. History in Africa 33, 25-31

2 Adesina, O.C. (2006), Teaching history in twentieth century Nigeria: The challenge of change. History in Africa 33, 25-31

3 Collingwood R.G. (1942) The Idea of Nature (Clarendon Press, Oxford), p. 177

4 Oloruntimehin B.O., 'History and Society', Inaugural Lecture Series 18, OAU, Ile Ife, 1976

5 Microsoft® Encarta® 2009. © 1993-2008 Microsoft Corporation

6 Microsoft® Encarta® 2009. © 1993-2008 Microsoft Corporation

7 Microsoft® Encarta® 2009. © 1993-2008 Microsoft Corporation

8 E.H. Carr, History, Science, and Morality: What is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge, January –March 1961.

9 E.H. Carr, History, Science, and Morality: What is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge, January –March 1961.

10 W.H. Walsh, An Introduction to Philosophy of History, London: Hutchinson, University Library, 1967 edn.

11 E.H. Carr, What is History? London: Macmillan, 1989, eds

and arts. Fundamentally, the status of the hypotheses used by the historian in the process of his enquiry seems remarkably similar to that of the hypotheses used by the scientist. In other words, the aims and methods of the historian and the scientist are not essentially dissimilar.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, considering historical processes and methodologies of history, it is the considered opinion of this paper that history is scientific in nature.

### **History versus Scientific Knowledge**

Science does not only refer to practical matters, for R.G. Collingwood in his *'The Idea of Nature'* uses the term to refer to 'a body of systematic or orderly thinking about a determinate subject-matter'. For him science education thus has to be 'predominately a method for inducing habits of orderly and systematic thinking'.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, this refers not only to the natural science, but also to human sciences such as geography, sociology, English and history.

Collingwood is at pains to point out that almost all the disciplines including the pure sciences are dependent upon history. In addition to this, he pointed out that: "... natural science as a form of thought exists and has existed in a context of history, and depends on historical thought for its existence. From this it can be inferred that no one can understand natural science unless he understands history: and no one can answer the question of what nature is unless he knows what history is."<sup>3</sup> No wonder, Hughes-Warrington agrees with Collingwood that "given that civilization presupposes rational consciousness, there can be no civilization without history".<sup>4</sup>

Studying history as an academic subject/course or becoming a professional historian, one will be endowed with a robust knowledge about wide range of topics cutting across almost every field of enterprise and there will also be incorporation of writing prowess that is highly characterized with fecundity of mind and profundity of critical thinking with in-depth analysis, dexterousness, balanced story, succinct interpretation and premeditated articulation & logical reasoning.

Thus, 'historical knowledge is no luxury, or mere amusement of a mind at leisure from more pressing obligations, but a prime duty, whose discharge is essential to the maintenance, not only of any particular form or type of reason, but of reason itself.'<sup>5</sup> History develops in us; critical thinking, ability to assess situations, a sense of judgment; human understanding tolerance and wisdom, training for citizenship and it also stimulate imagination: imagination is considered as the mother of invention. No wonder, R.E. Crookall in *'Handbook for History Teachers in Africa'* argues that "history tends to justify its continue existence in the school curriculum on the ground that it develops pupil's critical thinking."<sup>6</sup> History contributes to the development of education of individuals in the society and history provides the link between subjects and the curriculum as a whole.<sup>7</sup> History is the synthesizer of our knowledge of the history of mankind.<sup>8</sup>

Generally, history is about everything past and naturally, scientific past is part of history. As we evolved, the scientific perceptions and technological inventions too evolved along signifying a pregnant past of ideas to build upon by the subsequent generations. Science has always been influenced by the cultural and socio-economic and political milieu of the times which are imbedded in history.<sup>9</sup>

Many are of the opinion that history is about the story of the rise and fall of ancient empires and kingdom. Thus, they query why the discipline must be taken serious. They browse the cosmos for any meaningful products of historians; they seem to find nothing except for the avalanche of historic writings. This indifference to history as a discipline is not surprising at all because evident are the phenomena of industrialization, modernization, and globalization. Coupled with this, is the fact that this generation is a tech-generation – a generation whose fabric is daily and continually bombarded with the so-called scientific products such as iphones, ipads, tele-medicine, etc. Thus, one of the fundamental questions being asked un-consciously is 'can courses in humanity trigger scientific and technological innovation?'

### **Conclusion**

Fundamentally, this paper calls for an expedition and exploration into the works of the historians in subfields such as Environmental History, Social Media History, Agricultural History, History of Technology, etc. It would be found that amidst the cacophony of ideas and innovations ushering in modernity and civilization –

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1 E.H. Carr, History, Science, and Morality: What is History? The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge, January –March 1961.

2 Collingwood R.G. (1940) *The Idea of Nature* (Clarendon Press, Oxford), p. 134

3 Collingwood R.G. (1942) *The Idea of Nature* (Clarendon Press, Oxford), p. 177

4 Marnie T.E. Hughes-Warrington, 'How Good an Historian Shall I Be?' R.G. Collingwood on Education' Oxford Review of Education, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Jun., 1996) p 225

5 Collingwood R.G. (1937-38) *The Function of Metaphysics in Civilization*, Ms Collingwood, Deposit 19(10) p. 47

6 Cookall R.E., *Handbook for History teacher in Africa*, (London: Evans Brothers, 1960)

7 Marnie T.E. Hughes-Warrington, 'How Good an Historian Shall I Be?' R.G. Collingwood on Education' Oxford Review of Education, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Jun., 1996) p 225

8 H. T. Parker, *The Uses of Other Disciplines in History*, High School Journal, Vol. 51, No. 5 (Feb., 1968 University of North Carolina Press, ), pp. 187-194

9 <http://kathleenmcil.wordpress.com/2011/02/21/history-an-art-or-science-how-different-are-they/>

courses in humanities and history in particular had been the fulcrum of scientific breakthroughs. Indeed, scientific revolution, industrial revolution, information revolution and other technological revolutions all had their foundation roots in the 'Enlightenment' which itself is deeply rooted in history. History serves as a base for all other disciplines, in that we talk about different histories: the history of law, history of medicine, history of science and technologies, history of ideas, history of International Relations, etc.

Ludmilla in '*History in Practice*' opines that '*in a sense what we call anthropology is a very old intellectual concern that has long been allied with history.*' In the same vein, according to him modernization theory employs in sociology remains deeply entrenched in historical practice and the analysis of modes of production and their implications, class oppression, revolution, ideology and imperialism were all rooted in history. Debating about the import of history, Ludmilla further argues that 'the kinship between Sociology and History can be understood as having three dimensions: the shared content of history and anthropology, common methods and overlapping accounts of practice.'<sup>1</sup> Indeed, toeing the line of Ludmilla's argument, many scholars had showed how the importance of history transverses all disciplines.

Significantly, history is a way to acquire knowledge. History gives the opportunity to find out the truth. Every human being has a natural tendency to know and to seek after knowledge and history makes this possible. Historians are critical to construction of knowledge. It is important to point here that knowledge is critical to the society. Indeed, the society runs on structured knowledge. In other words, cultures, civilizations, institutions, beliefs, religions, dynasties, etc are all configured on knowledge. Calculatedly, the elite, politicians and leaders of all sorts from the ancient past have utilised the services of historians (local & professional) to construct, reconstruct and deconstruct structured knowledge (history) of their society. Generally, history is about a research of truth, that is, looking at what has happened in the past and why they happened.

Historical research has attained an improbable thoroughness on account of scientific tools, though; history remains a classical resource model. Without history, humanity would not have and might lose 'historical conscience' (which the likes of R.G. Collingwood sermonize about) that has been guiding mankind all along its civilizing regeneration. History is about everything past. Naturally, scientific past is part of history. As we evolved, the scientific perceptions and technological inventions too evolved along signifying a pregnant past of ideas to build upon by the subsequent generations. Science has always been influenced by the cultural and socio-economic and political milieu of the times.<sup>2</sup> Though for academic purpose and easy understanding, we have compartmentalized our pursuits, in reality our evolution is constantly and continually being influenced by History.

Observably, more free scholarship awards are offered by both state and federal governments of Nigeria to students who want to pursue science or technology based courses both at the undergraduate and post-graduate levels locally and internationally. What is worrisome is the fact that this is done to the detriment of students of humanities/arts. Curriculum planners of the ministry of education in Nigeria should consider the re-introduction of history into the school curriculum at least from the secondary school level.

Without gainsaying, history is pivotal to scientific knowledge. It is the foundation for all scientific inventions, innovations, and technological advancement. Coupled with this is the fact that all interdisciplinary contributions to rational knowledge are rooted in history. History according to Marwick is a major industry in contemporary society. Human society according to him needs history despite the level of sophistication of our day; because not only is history being constantly called upon, historical judgments are constantly being made.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, 'multidisciplinarity' and 'interdisciplinarity' are now imbedded in the works of Nigerian professional historians. Therefore, history, as well as other humanity courses must not be neglected. In fact, if Nigeria, and other African countries want to trace their paths to technological breakthroughs and innovation, history is one of the disciplines that must be taken critically both by the people and the governments.

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1 Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, London: Arnold (2000), p. 73

2 <http://kathleenmcil.wordpress.com/2011/02/21/history-an-art-or-science-how-different-are-they/>

3 Marwick, A. (1980). *The nature of history*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf