

THE PAST AND SOCIETY: TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

The significance of the past to the development of the modern society has suffered mortification in the recent past. The past is regarded as the forgone antecedents of the human society and therefore has no relevance to the articulations and projections of the extant and future society of man. This scenario has resulted in the less emphasis to the values of the past as envisaged in the various studies and beliefs of the extant society. The implication is the ever wrong approach in the policy planning and implementation in the society by the relevant authorities. However this paper had an in-depth study on the relevance and understanding of the past with particular reference to the human society. The paper further revealed the sources of the past and the relevance of the past to the extant and future society of man. This is imperative because the understanding of the past and its values would serve as a charitable instrument in the hands of policy makers, developers, archaeologists, historians, legislators, etc, towards ensuring a sustainable development in the society.

Keywords: *Past, knowledge, Sustainability, Development and Society.*

The Preamble

“The past is what all people build their present and future on; without this they sit in a void waiting to reclaimed their history, suspended in a bottomless pit” (Garrison, 1986: 1). It has been discovered that the knowledge of the past is a key that unlocks the understanding of the present and mysteries of the future. Take for instance, “...to understand the present technological stagnation of Africa both the willful destruction of indigenous industrial activities... and the total disregard of local creative capabilities which they foster must be taken into account” (Bello, 2000: 115). This clearly depicts the neglect of past in the African society. Reconstruction and appreciation of the contribution of the past to the success of present and future society is among the assurances of prospective society (Layton, 1989). Many national governments, guided by this belief, have deemed it necessary towards unraveling of their past, while the ignorance of the past has led to the failure of some proposals of individuals, groups, societies and even governments. People have neglected the indispensable position of the past in solving societal problems. Some segments of the public today have wrongly perceived the past as a mere unraveling of the lies of yesterday by aimless scholars or explorers. They perceive it as a way of keeping the field of archaeology in the list of academic fields so as to create earning opportunity to archaeologists. Many other people see it as a way of packaging lies as didactic lessons to youths of today in order to make a better tomorrow. This wrong perception of the past by people has led to the asking of the following questions; does it mean that people do not know the importance of the past? Or that they do not know who needs the past? Or that they fell to understand the source of knowledge of the past?

Moreover, this misconception about the past by many today in the society will pose high level of impediment to the overall development of our society, if not checked. This is because any prospective society stands on the past to understand the present and have a good articulated projection of the future since "our image of the present, our consciousness of ourselves and other peoples is founded on our knowledge of the past" (Emmott, 1989: 21). However in an attempt to contribute towards ameliorating this particular problem in our society, this study is conducted with the aim of looking at why knowledge of the past is important, determine who needs the past and finally delineate ways of unveiling the past of any society.

Finally, it is highly expected that if the study is competently handled, it would contribute significantly to the sustainable development of the society by bringing out the essence of the past in our society, who makes use of the knowledge of the past in our society and also means of sourcing out the knowledge about the past. The study made use of both primary and secondary methods of data collection in its attempt to make a convincing study. While in the primary method, interviews and observations were used, in the secondary method, secondary materials like books, journals, articles, edited materials, etc, were consulted.

The Past

"...the past is an aspect of real time, universally experienced by all human beings, although perceived and structured by people of different cultures in different ways" (Williams et al, 1989:70). The Oxford Advanced learners Dictionary (2000 Edition), defined past as "the time that has gone by; things that happened in and earlier time" that is what is referred to as the past. Also looking at the past from the dimension of proximity, "the recent past is that time which has been experienced by the present generations and those just before them. The distant past, on the other hand, is, the time which is so distant that its experience is only known through oral tradition" (Ndagala et al, 1989: 51). Past can not be given a meaningful understanding without appreciation of the future (Williams et al, 1989) since they are inseparable twins.

However, in the context of this study, past can be defined as the forgone ideologies, norms, belief systems, culture and tradition, etc, of a people which was used by their extinct societies or former generations that had existed and had sized to exist but left behind some traces of information about it. We can further define it as the lost years in the life line of a society or group of people dating back to some hundreds of years before present. The knowledge of this period is mostly gotten from archaeological evidence and some other evidences. Moreover, in the context of archaeology, the past of any society is divided into parts; the prehistory, protohistory and history periods. In the understanding of these distinctive parts within the context of archaeology, Bray et al, (1975), puts it as thus;

"In the strict sense, history is an account to the past recovered from written records, but such an account can be prepared from other sources, notably archaeology. The term 'prehistory' was coined (by Daniel Wilson in 1851 though in France Tournal had used 'prehistorique' as early as 1833) to cover the story of man's development before the appearance

of writing. It is succeeded by protohistory, the period for which we have some records but must still rely largely on archaeological evidence to give us a coherent account” (Bray et al, 1975:189).

More importantly, archaeology is more interested on the predestined period of the past of any society so as to unveil and make information available for the protohistoric or historic period of the society.

Finally, past is defined as a forgotten period in the historical development of any society which can still be unearthed and revealed to the present generation of the society through archaeological means and some other sources of information. Although yesterday can be said to be the past of today and tomorrow, but in the context of this study, the past refers not that of yesterday, two days ago, one week ago, last year, etc, but the distant past that runs into hundreds of years before present and which the present generation of the society knows nothing about unless through archaeological discoveries and some other means of unraveling the hidden past of the society which shall still be looked at as the study progresses.

Why is Knowledge of the Past Important?

However, the past of any society holds the key that unlocks the future of the society. Many people in the past have questioned the importance of the knowledge of the past because they see the past as a forgone antecedence that is irrelevant in the development and sustenance of any society. But this notion is very wrong since the knowledge of the past can be used in the policy formulation of the society. Any sustainable and effective policy of any society should have its underpinning on the past of the society to enable it tackle the future of the society effectively and in a sustainable approach. This is why most policy formulation teams of a society consults the past of the society so as to make effective and sustainable policy for the future of the society. Furthermore, the knowledge of the past helps in giving social identify to the people. Take for instance, the famous excavation of the Igbo-Ukwu pot by archaeologist, has helped in building the social identify of the people of the area. The same is applicable to the people of Benin, Nok, Ife, etc. It is the unraveling of the past of these people that promoted their images both at the national and world scale.

Furthermore, the archaeologist, ethnographer, anthropologist, historian, etc, make maximum use of the past in studying the culture of any group or society. The knowledge of the past helps to put these professionals through in their various fields of human endeavour and that is why the majority part of their practice dwell on the past of a people and how to put it together through reconstruction, interpretation and analysis to present to the people for them to know the travel route of their society from the ancient times. Also the knowledge of the past helps for convincible cultural linkage of generations. At times the discovery of the past might help in determining the original inhabitant of an area through archaeological practices. This was the case in some archaeological discoveries within the Nsukka vicinity of Enugu State. Finally the knowledge of the past gives personal and group confidence to people. It is only when you know your past that you can claim what belongs to you. This is why an Igbo man would not allow an Hausa man to come and start determining land

boundary with him at the eastern part of Nigeria unless the land was claimed by the Hausa man to be acquired or bought over and not inherited. Also the knowledge of the past helps in the cultural survey of any given society through the process of culture transition through generations. It is only through the knowledge of the past that one knows the cultural values of his ancestors and also upholds such so as to live happily in the area with cherished and sound value system.

How do we know About the Past?

Having looked at the necessity of the past of any society to the socio-economic development of the society in our previous sub-chapter, one might be inquisitive to ask 'How do we know about our Past?' In response to this question, many sources have proved effective and productive in quest for the past of any society. These include, historical sources, archaeological finds, ethnographic sources, others include media, school, tradition, etc

Oral Tradition: This is one of the major ways of acquiring knowledge about past mostly in the African traditional society. Mbunwe-Samba puts the understanding of oral tradition with special reference to the African traditional society as thus:

"They are the product of ...experience rooted at a particular time in the life of the society. This built up wealth of African oral tradition has lived, is living and will live in the folklore of the people; it is enshrined in the memories and heart of the people, particularly in the minds of the talented tenth-hands, 'griots' (skilled performers of oral narrative), praise singers, raconteurs and story tellers, as they are called ...these tradition- bearers have kept active the totality of our life-style and philosophy, and entire wisdom of the tribe, the cherished values of our society, the unique system of our beliefs, the pristine virtues of our humanity and the rich cultural heritage found in the folk tales, myths, legends, proverbs, superstitions, songs and recitations of our ancestors, which have come down from the remote past of our history" (Mbunwe-Samba, 1989:105).

The dominance of the oral tradition in the knowledge of the past, mostly in the African traditional society is not unconnected to the late arrival of formal education to the African soil. The early Africans relied more on the oral information in the linking of different generations. Such tradition is still inherent in the today's African traditional society.

Archaeology: This is simple the study of the past society of man through the material remains left behind. "These remains are collected not as an end in themselves, but as a means of obtaining information about their makers, the lives they lived and how they related to the environment...these material remains, or objects are seen as containing, reflecting or saying sometime about the people who produced and or used them" (Andah et al, 1994:1). However, archaeology through various means of unearthing the past of a people i.e. reconnaissance, excavation, analysis and interpretation, have proven to be a good source of knowledge of the past of any society.

Ethnography: This is the study and interpretation of the extant society of a people so as to understand their extinct society. It makes use of oral interviews and living evidences to reconstruct the past of a people. It is also another effective source of peoples past. It is a detailed and concentrated study on the extant society (Lewis, 1985; Yin, 1994) so as to source information concerning their extinct society since the knowledge of the past could sometimes be buried in the present. This is because anthropological studies have proven that a good study of any living society would help in articulating the past of the society. They arrived at this conclusion having seen that the culture base of any society is a product of their extinct society which had survived through generations with relative modifications.

Media and written materials: Stone (1989) observed that another means of getting to know about the past of a people is through media which include radio, television, newspapers, magazines, etc and also written methods which include books, journals, articles, etc. These modes could be said to be the secondary means of knowing the past of a people since the information they are passing across are most of the times products of archaeological, ethnographical or historical researches.

Historical sources: This is also another source of getting to know about the past of a people. It is the systematic documentation and arrangement of the past history of a people by historians towards packaging the past as a gift to the present. This could be unveiled through published materials, media documentaries, audio visuals, films, etc.

Finally these are some of the major ways through which the past of a people can be unveiled to the present society towards ensuring good knowledge of the past to understand their present and have a sustainable and effective plan for their future.

Public Perception of the Past

There have been mixed feelings on the public perception of the past. Most people have not shown much interest on their past. People see the study of the past as a mean of surviving the practice or profession of archaeology to avoid its extinction. This group of people would use destructive languages to discard off the oral traditions, archaeological/historical evidences, etc. They use derogatory languages and acts like religious iconoclasm, neglect on customs and traditions, vandalism and destruction of cultural properties, etc, to draw their irreplaceable past to the mud. Sometimes this altitude may be due to the influence of westernization. For instance in writing about the Inuit perceptions of the past, Anawak has this to say, "In a harsh environment such as our home in the Canadian Arctic, it is necessary to hand down from generation to generation the knowledge and skills to ensure survival. Learning these skills is not optional. The recent arrival of the 'white men'...has brought with it the introduction of clotting, vehicles, implements and adornments. Many are now being utilized, but they prove to be of limited use compared with time-honoured ways of creating shelter and providing transport on the land" (Anawak, 1989: 45-46).

However, apart from westernization which has made people to perceive their past as antiquated, barbaric and of no technological importance to their present, another causes of wrong perception of the past is the wrong representation of the past by those responsible for digging out the past. For instance if the past of a people is wrongly presented through media

documentaries in radio, television, newspaper, etc, it will paint a wrong image of the people. So the people who present the past like archaeologists, ethnographers, historians, media, elders, etc, should know that they have much role to play in ensuring good public perceptiveness of the past by using attractive, convincing and understandable methods in presenting the past to the different segments of the public i.e. children, aged, adult, elites, etc, to ensure quality understanding and embracing of the past by the general public.

Neglecting the Past: The Consequences

It is a truism that majority of the public today mostly in this part of the world (Africa, etc) have neglected the importance or the role of the past in the sustainable development. However, the study will look briefly on the consequences neglecting the past can cause to any society. First and foremost, neglecting the past of any society is throwing away the social identity of that society which invariably affects the individual identity in that society. It will place a society in a condition like that of a plant growing without a root. Such societies would be vulnerable to all kinds of problems like intimidations, abuses, disgrace, neglects, etc, from their neighbours. They would not have any evidence or back-up to lean on and give a good defense of their society. Such societies may be devoid of a unique culture; rather borrowed culture would make the understanding of their culture impossible. Policy formulators in such a society would find it difficult, since there might be no basis or blue print for them to look on. And such society will be politically deprived in all level of politicking be it national, regional, continental or international. This is because they are deprived of a unique identity that would be highly esteemed.

Finally, neglecting the past of any society, throw the society in a situation of unknown present and fear of tomorrow. Leaders in such a society would be confused to lead since they are ignorant of the root of the society. In most cases such societies are bound to suffer the same problems that were suffered from by their extinct societies. This is because a good link with the extinct societies reveals some of these problems and their possible solutions so as not to pose hindrance to the present and future generations of the society. Therefore it is expedient that people should look for their past, study it and preserve it for the growth and sustenance of their various societies.

Who Needs The Past?

The Society: The major segment of the public that should embrace their past more is the society at large. For instance the media needs the past to aid them in the quality documentary of the past of the people and also in the planning and presentations of any program that requires the knowledge of the past of the people. The school needs the knowledge of the past in planning viable curriculum for the pupils and students. Even the children need to be taught about their past for them to have respect for their society and have a good moral standard. The same is applicable to the adult and youth in any society who need the knowledge of their past to create their social identity and be proud of their identity wherever they found themselves. Any society that has its pasts unearthed is posed with the problem of lack of sustainable growth since every segment of the society as seen above has their own individual contribution towards the sustainable development of the society if they are conscious of their past. But the reverse will be the case if they lack the knowledge of their past. To this

regard, society is one of the variables that need the knowledge of the past to ensure growth, sustenance and development in all ramifications.

Policy Developers: This is another group of individuals in any given area that requires a good knowledge of the past so as to have a quality policy formulation in the area. Any policy or blue print that is developed from the past experience is bound to be effective, efficient and sustainable since it considers all the failures of similar policies in the area in the past. Furthermore, in formulating policy for any given area, the policy formulators are expected to have a good knowledge of the cultural background of the area which is embedded in their past, if success is to be recorded. Therefore they need to ask the following questions, who are these people? Where did they migrate from? Who are their ancestors? What is their original cultural background? etc. It is obvious that answers to these questions are embedded in the past of the people which entails that the policy formulators or developers need a good knowledge about the people to ensure success and sustainability of the policy or blue print they are developing for the people in the area. A typical example was the discarding of the Bill on Same-sex Marriage by the Nigerian National Assembly in 2011, on the ground of cultural insignificance.

The Judiciary: In making some quality judicial interpretations or in passing some judgments in the law court, the judiciary needs a good knowledge of the past in an attempt to ensure competent judgment that is devoid of bias and ignorant of the past. Eze-uzomaka (2003) made it known that in some land cases in law courts the judiciary needs the knowledge of the past society or culture of the area through help from archaeologists, so as to ascertain the true owner of the land in dispute, after archaeological analysis of the extinct society of the area and the extant societies who are claiming the land. The judiciary also needs the information on how a given case was handled in the past so as to follow the line in establishing judgment for the present case. However in a customary court, before establishing judgment in some issues, the court always requires information about the past of the area from the living elders or archives. Such information enables the court to establish the standard and identity of the people of the area, and pass a convincing judgment on vital issues.

The Legislature: These are the people that make law for the society. They make laws that guide and preserve the society. It is paramount to note at this juncture that these people need a good knowledge of the past of the area they are making law for. This is because in most cases where these legislators do not have the knowledge of the cultural background of a people, the area is posed with the problem of unprotected cultural background and identity through relevant legislations. It is only when these legislators know and appreciate the value of the past that they can make viable and implementable laws in protecting archaeological practices and preserving the cultural properties of the area. For instance the archaeologists in Nigeria for years have been crying for the promulgation of a law on contract or rescue archaeology as found in some western countries in Nigeria. However, the legislators in any political setting need a good knowledge of the past of people they are making laws for so as to make viable and sustainable laws that will equally protect and preserve the identity and cultural background of the people.

Archaeologist: In the words of Nwana (1989:186) Archaeologists can be seen as people who are interested in finding out the history of ancestors or the aborigines of a place. They do this by systematically studying the remains of the people's material culture. These remains are either buried underneath the soil or found on the surface. The archaeologists gather information either by digging deeply into the various layers of the earth and systematically examining the material remains that lie buried, or by scientifically observing the features of old settlements or abandoned sites, comparing these with the features of the present. However, Nwana (1989) gave a good look at the necessity of past to archaeology and archaeologists' means of unearthing the past of a people. Archaeologists are the people who professionalizes in knowing or getting information about the extinct societies of man so as to package and preserve it for the present and future societies. "The complacent attitude of archaeologists and their apparent disregard of the opinion of the rest of the population is a near-suicide stance. At times when government funding can no longer be relied upon to produce even half of the finance required for excavation of sites threatened with destruction in the country, the public must be made aware of the importance of all archaeological works" (Stone, 1989:204). Stone also furthered by saying that archaeology as a practice should not be done in academic isolation, but must take into account public opinion about the past and different ways in which the public want to use and know about the past (Stone, 1989), this is because of the fragile position of archaeologists in unveiling and upholding the past of a people. The archaeologists does not only need the past but also reconstruct and reveals the past of a people to the extant societies. The information on the past of people as unveiled by the archaeologists is needed by the society in general including the legislators, judiciaries, schools, children, etc, in their good understanding of their past in all ramifications. So archeologists are in love with the past that was why they employ some scientifically and systematically arranged means in unearthing the past i.e. reconnaissance, excavation, interpretation and analysis.

The Historian, Anthropologist and Ethnographer: These are some other professions of man that requires good knowledge of the past in manipulating variables in their profession when studying about a people or society. For instance, the historian needs a good knowledge of the past of a people before documenting, writing or giving historical information about any society. They equally help in packaging the past of a people to the public (Njoku, 2002). Anthropologists on the other hand study and interpret the culture of a people. It has shown that a good knowledge of the past culture of the people motivates their understanding in studying the present culture of the people. Furthermore, Ethnographers are the people who study the present societies or the extant societies of a people. They equally need the knowledge of the past of the people to enhance and authenticate the information gotten from the present so as to have a quality study of the extant society (Yin, 1994).

Conclusion:

This paper looks at the past of any society. It started by giving why the knowledge of the past is important to any society, how the knowledge of the past is gotten, how past is conceived and the consequences of neglecting the past in any society. It went further to discuss people that needs the past as; the society, policy developers, legislators, the archae

ologist, the historians, the ethnographers, the anthropologist, the judiciary, etc. From the little exposition made in this paper about the past, one would conceive the importance of the knowledge of the past to any society. The work revealed that there is no section of the public that does not need the past. Children, youths, adults, aged the government, elites, judiciary, legislators, policy developers, etc, in any society need to source and acquire the knowledge of the past, to cherish and preserve it. Such would enable to build on individual and group confidence, establish human identity and finally contribute immensely towards the onward sustainable growth and development of the society. This is pertinent because, "in a harsh environment...it is necessary to hand down from generation to generation the knowledge and skills to ensure survival" (Anawak, 1989: 45). However, it is recommended that the study of the past be introduced in the primary and post-primary schools to enable the children have a good knowledge of the past from the tender age so that when they grow they would uphold and cherish their past in the society. The section of the public responsible for packaging the past of a society should also make good use of the television, radio, newspapers, articles, journals, etc, in packaging and projecting the importance of the past in any given society and the contribution of the knowledge of the past in achieving sustainable growth and development of any society.

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