

DOING CHURCH HISTORY IN A CYBER CULTURE IN NIGERIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

Before the cyber age, doing church history or reconstructing a past event in the life of a church involved mainly the use of primary sources obtained through physical visits to relevant church, private and public archives and one-on-one oral interviews with eyewitnesses. In a cyber culture, will doing church history continue the same way it used to be before the cyber era? Will correspondences and diaries continue to be accessible to the church history researcher? How can the church historian access the email correspondences of a dead church leader? What happens to diary entries made in a tablet or palmtop? Must interviews involve eye-to-eye contact for them to be valid? How can foreign archives be accessed? What are the problems and prospects of doing church history in the cyber age? The study uses the qualitative method to answer these questions. The findings reveal that doing church history can benefit from online resource materials. Online interviews are valid possibilities. It is also possible for scholars who are doing church history to get archives sources from distant archives. Getting correspondences through the email inbox of a dead person will be a herculean task that involves ethical considerations. Getting information from diary entries in palmtops or tablets will be challenging to a historian who needs such information for doing church history. Flowing from the findings, the study recommends that church historians should explore the use of the internet for doing church history. The study also recommends that email users and those who make diary entries in their laptops, palmtops and tablets should let their next-of-kin know the password to their mails and personal computers; and should also give their consent in the form of a will for researchers to access their inbox and computers whenever they are no more.

KEYWORDS: Cyber Culture, Doing Church History, Problems and Prospects

INTRODUCTION

Before the cyber age writers of church history could work with only sources that were available within their geographical reach. The cyber age has introduced a paradigm shift: writers of church history can now have access to a plethora of relevant information from across the cyber space from any part of the inhabited earth. But this landmark opportunity for doing church history is not without its negative aspects. In ‘Doing Church

History in a Cyber Culture in Nigeria' the current writer looks at the problems and prospects related to the art and of writing church history in an African context.

It is important to situate the paper in the context of existing literature. At the moment there is no extant work available to the current writer within his geographical space or online that goes by the title of this paper. The work of Ikenga R.A. Ozigboh (1990), 'Doing Church History in Nigeria Today', has not captured the concerns of this paper. In their co-authored work, *Church History: An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods*, James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller (1995) mention computerised database but did not say anything related to the problem and prospect of doing church history in a cyber culture (100-125, 144-151). The works of Donald A. Ritchie (*Doing Oral History* - 2003) and Musa A.B. Gaiya ('Writing Grassroots Church History in Nigeria' - 2006) are both silent about writing church history in a cyber culture. In contrast, Christina Quinlan's (2011) *Business Research Methods* has mentioned a concern of this paper, online and telephone interviews. Quinlan discusses the possibility of online questionnaires and online interviews as well as telephone interviews, but in the context of business research (289-292). Quinlan could not go further to show how the internet could be used in archives research as well. Similarly, Ndidi Justice Gbule's (2019) 'African Church Historiography: A Case for a Polycentric Approach' mentions writing church history, but not in the context of the cyber age (328-345). Thus this paper is making a significant contribution to doing church history in Africa, particularly Nigeria.

The paper is organised into eight sections. The first section deals with the introduction which sets the stage for understanding the paper. Next is the conceptual clarification where words and phrases are clarified to aid readers to comprehend the content of the paper. Thirdly, doing church history in traditional or analogue culture paints the background for the main thrust of the paper. Fourthly, doing church history in a cyber culture describes current trends in doing church history today. The next section examines problems related to doing church history in a cyber culture with a view to proffer solution to the emerging or identified problems. Sixthly, prospects of doing church history in a cyber culture are also examined. The way forward and the conclusion form the seventh and eighth sections in that order.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Cyber culture

Cyber culture refers to the contemporary mores or way of life that emerges from the use of the internet, using computers and mobile phones, for business, communication and entertainment (Hornby 374, 381).

Doing Church History

Doing church history means interrogating the past of the church in order to make meaning of what happened. It is a mental engagement with the past using reliable sources in order

to establish a connection between what happened and present realities in the life of the church. It is in this light that Ogbu U. Kalu asserts that "...doing church history could be an evangelical strategy when the knowledge of the past is a commitment for the future" (60). In this particular context, 'doing church history' is a phrase which means critical and objective examination of past events in the life of a church through making investigations, collecting reliable historical evidence, reconstructing and documenting what happened. 'Doing history' is not the same with 'knowing history'. The later means reading or learning what happened in the past in order to have a wealth of knowledge about the past (Cote par 1-6).

Prospect

Prospect means 'The possibility that something will happen' (Hornby 1235). In this sense prospect connotes or suggests anticipation, forecast, prediction or projection.

DOING CHURCH HISTORY IN A TRADITIONAL OR ANALOGUE CULTURE

In a traditional or analogue setting, doing church history involves painstakingly locating and scouting for primary sources. Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb and Joseph M. Williams describe primary sources in the following words: "In history, for example, primary sources include documents from the period or person you are studying [...]" (69). In other words, primary sources are first-hand information about a subject matter. Most of the primary sources necessary for reconstructing local church histories are deposited in private, church and public archives. This means that archives sources are often in the form of handwritten or printed materials. Archives do not contain documents only. Sometimes, relics of the past of a community, organisation, family and individuals, such as tools, photos, films, audio-recordings, maps, clothing, furniture and utensils are also found in archives (Booth, Colomb and Williams 69-70; Bradley and Muller 39).

Primary sources are also oral in nature. They are found in the memories of those who lived at a particular period and witnessed what a historian is writing about. The information in the memory of eyewitnesses of a past event that are of interest to a historian need to be elicited (or brought out) from memory, recorded and transcribed. Therefore, doing church history in a traditional culture also involves the use of open-ended (limitless) or unstructured questions for face-to-face oral conversations with eyewitnesses of an account or custodians of the traditions of a people group (Omolewa 1-4; Palmer 35, 58; Nieuwenhuis 87).

Although the computers, internet and phones have revolutionised the world of scholarship, it is pertinent to clarify that the cyber culture has not eradicated all traditional aspects of doing church history. It is obvious that many aspects of the traditional ways of the research and writing of church history will continue to be significant for many years to come.

DOING CHURCH HISTORY IN A CYBER CULTURE

John P. Foley and Pierfranco Pastore appropriately note that the cyber space offers Christians in general and Christian scholars in particular a variety of information including:

[...] direct and immediate access to important religious and spiritual resources—great libraries and museums and places of worship, the teaching documents of the Magisterium, the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church and the religious wisdom of the ages (Foley and Pastore par 14).

Therefore, in a cyber culture, doing church history is relatively easier and cheaper in terms of cost of transportation and travelling risk than before the cyber age, particularly when reconstructing the history of missions or the earliest churches in Nigeria. In order to reconstruct an event related to the history of the church in Nigeria, one needs to locate archives to get archive sources. The cyber space is able to help church history scholars to know where some relevant archives related to Africa or Nigeria are located. For example, the Colombia University Libraries have repositories related to Africa. Scholars from around the world could make enquiries through the libraries of their own institutions, and may even get relevant information from these repositories without having to travel to Columbia (*Columbia University Libraries* par 1-6). Through the internet, some church history researchers in Nigeria have been able to procure archive materials from distant lands such as the United States of America (Rengshwat iv).

Similarly, the cyber space has made interview with people across cultures possible. Hitherto, in analogue or traditional culture, direct physical contact between the interviewer and interviewee was the ideal. With the advent of computers, phones and the internet, it is possible and permissible to interview relevant interviewees who live in far-away lands through online chats and zoom. It is also possible to make telephone interviews (Quinlan 289-292).

The cyber space has also helped church historians in a variety of ways that are related to doing church history. Apparently, the cyber space is used for communication between church history scholars among themselves and for matters related to research and academic conferences. The cyber space is used by some church history scholars to scout for research scholarships. It is also used for communication between prolific church history scholars and the publishers of their books and monographs. The internet is often used by church historians to advertise the books and monographs they have published. The internet is useful for communication among members of academic professional bodies such as the Nigerian Association of Church History and Missiological Studies (NACHAMS). Furthermore, church historians use the internet to showcase collections of their publications to the world in order to demonstrate their visibility.

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH DOING CHURCH HISTORY IN A CYBER CULTURE

As helpful as the internet is for doing church history, it is not without its problems. First, there is a decline in the use of correspondence or letter writing globally. Before the advent of the internet, letter-writing or the use of correspondence:

[...] was a central feature of life in Europe and its empires during the nineteenth century. Long-established as a feature of familial, commercial, and diplomatic communication in Europe, letter writing took on even greater significance within the context of empire building, and it remained absolutely foundational to imperial politics and colonial cultures into the twentieth century. Within modern imperial systems and colonial societies letter writing fulfilled four essential functions. First, it played a crucial role in imperial diplomacy and international relations [...] A second essential function of letter writing was its role in imperial administration. Handwritten correspondence was of vital importance in the machinery of imperial government as European officials in the colonies wrote to their masters in Europe, providing the latest news and seeking advice on important policy matters [...] A third function of letter writing was its role throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries in the general dissemination of information among private individuals [...] A fourth important function of the exchange of letters was to maintain and affirm bonds of connection amid the upheavals and disruptions that characterized the new industrial and imperial world. [...] overseas service in the military or in merchant fleets, and waves of migrants to distant colonies stretched family structures and potentially undercut the ties of affection and affiliation that linked individuals to their traditional communities. Letter writing was one way to maintain these connections (Encyclopedia.com par 1-4).

Some of these correspondences were often deposited in archives, as primary sources essential for the reconstruction of aspects of church history and biographies of missionaries and national Christians. Many writers of history such as Duke Akamisoko (78), Michael Crowther (320) and J. Lowry Maxwell (229-230) have used letters or correspondence as sources. The invention of the internet made the conveyance of correspondences very faster. With the internet, time gaps are completely bridged. The efficiency and cost effectiveness of correspondences through emails led to the dwindling of hardcopy (written on paper) correspondences. Writing in the year 2012, Jessica Hopper aptly narrates a real-life situation where the internet has robbed people of hardcopy correspondences. In her words:

When Helen and Jay Stassen's 21-year-old son, Benjamin, committed suicide 19 months ago, he did not leave a note. If it had been 20 years ago [Hopper wrote in 2012], the Stassens might have looked through diaries, letters or other personal

items in an attempt to find clues as to why he decided to end his life. These days, however, young people tend not to keep things on paper; instead, their most intimate thoughts are likely to be online – in emails, social media posts and personal blogs (par 1-3).

The growing absence of hard correspondences today implies that the scope of primary sources for doing church history is limited. Scholars cannot easily have access to correspondences by email because of the private or secretive nature of correspondences by emails.

Secondly, the coming of computers, tablets, and phones has affected the culture of keeping hard copy diaries. A diary is the daily, weekly or monthly records of events in the life of a person, group of people, organisation or business institution. Diary keeping was an essential aspect of colonial and missionary life. Some Nigerians inherited the culture of diary keeping from European missionaries. The availability of laptops, tablets and phones has led to a paradigm shift in diary keeping. Many contemporary people often record the chronicles of daily happenings around them inside their phones, tablets or laptops. This has led to the dwindling of hard copy diaries. Since laptops, tablets and phones, which contain daily entries about the life of a person or organisation cannot be deposited in an archive, diaries as primary sources appear to be fast disappearing in the cyber culture that we are in.

Thirdly, the obvious and perennial irregularity and weakness of network in some communities of Nigeria is a problem related to doing church history in Nigeria in a cyber age. The poor network can hamper communications with the workers of distant archives and interviewees.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the Western world has been engaging church history in a cyber culture for a longer period than developing countries like Nigeria. It is possible that Western church historians have been able to find solutions to some of the challenges discussed above. In Nigeria, the challenges of doing church history in an internet age are glaring but surmountable.

PROSPECTS OF DOING CHURCH HISTORY IN A CYBER CULTURE

From the discussion on ‘Doing Church History in a Cyber Culture’ above, it is clear that the future of doing church history in contemporary Nigerian society is brighter. The cyber space has made it possible for the church historian to have access to worlds of materials on history, philosophies of history, theories of history, and methods of church history. It has also enabled the church historians to have access to current conversations on ethical considerations related to doing church history. In addition, it has made accessibility to archives around the globe easier than before.

This means that if church historians harness the opportunities provided by the cyber space we expect to see more relevant writings on the story of the church in Nigeria. The cyber space has guaranteed that when more works are written on the story of the

church, there will be wider readership, particularly when such works are published on the internet.

The increasing disappearance of paper correspondences and handwritten diaries mean that in the future, the volume or scope of primary sources available for reconstructing church history will be limited unless internet service providers (e.g. Google and Yahoo) and individuals are willing to collaborate and cooperate on what happens to the inbox of individuals when they are no longer alive. For research purposes, researchers need permission to access the inbox of those who have died. Getting such permission is a daunting task which requires the collaborative efforts of relations of the dead, service providers and the legal institution of a land.

WAY FORWARD

This section seeks to answer the question ‘How can the problems associated with doing church history in a cyber culture be surmounted?’ One of the problems that this paper has discovered in relation to doing church history in a cyber age is network problem. Some of the network issues are related to weather problems, which are beyond the control of internet service providers. Researchers should discern the times of the year that often witness network issues, occasioned by weather conditions, so that they can plan not to use the internet for checking where they could find relevant primary sources in geographical areas other than their own.

As it has been noted, black and white or hardcopy correspondences are fast disappearing and making way for emails. Similarly, the convention of keeping diaries in small book forms is also dwindling. Obviously, diaries and correspondences contain rich historical evidence required for reconstructing local church histories. Correspondences and diaries still exist, but in computer or inbox-based forms which are beyond the reach of most church history scholars. To have access to the computer or inbox-based correspondences and diaries of someone who is still alive, a researcher can make request and explain the purpose for which the correspondences and diaries are required. The researcher may need to stress how diaries and correspondences are historical evidence for backing historical claims or for accurate dating.

To have access to the inbox and computer based correspondences and diaries of someone who has died, a researcher needs to be mindful of ethical considerations. Although the rights and privacy of the dead is a controversial issue in law globally, the privacy and rights of the dead is not completely obliterated by death (George and Mamedova 2-7). Many communities around the world believe that the wishes of the dead should be respected (Smolensky 763-803). This implies that a researcher should connect with the next-of-kin of the deceased to find out if the deceased wrote in their wills that their email message inbox and computer based diaries could be used for research purposes. It is difficult for researchers to have access to the email correspondences of someone who is no longer alive, where such arrangement was not made by a deceased. In

Nigeria, discussion related to the accessibility of the email correspondence of a deceased is a novel area. People can include access to their inbox in their will before they die. They can leave their passwords with their next-of-kin (Kabang Interview Jos 3:4:2024). This implies that individuals should be taught and encouraged to include in their wills what happens to their inbox or other related information on social media when they are no more.

Researchers may need the collaborative efforts of the relations of the deceased, internet service providers, the legal institution of a land and law enforcement agents, where a dead person did not leave a will about access to his email correspondences. What this means is that if the deceased did not leave any password behind, the consent of the relations of the deceased should be sought. If the relations of the deceased agree, the court should ratify the agreement and give a note of permit to internet service providers to break into the inbox of the deceased. When a researcher is able to secure such court permit, he needs state actors such as the police to accompany him to see the service providers (who may or may not consent to the wishes of the researcher on the basis of their own agreement with the deceased). This is obviously a herculean task that could unnecessarily consume a researcher's time and money.

CONCLUSION

'Doing church history' means the art of making investigations, collecting historical evidence and reconstructing past events in the life of a church. This paper argues that doing church history has been revolutionised by the advent of the computers, telephones and the internet. However the coming of the cyber age has implications for the use of correspondences and diaries as primary sources. The volume of letters written in black and white has reduced. The volume of diaries has also reduced because there are other ways of correspondence and diary keeping which the computer age has introduced.

The paper assumes that correspondences and diaries, commonly known as primary sources, are so important for the task of the reconstruction of historical events that scholars of church history need to find a way of accessing relevant inbox-based correspondences and computer based diaries. The writer argues that access to inbox-based and computer-based information for research purposes mean a network of collaborations between individuals, companies, churches, organisations and the legal profession regarding who should permit researchers to have access into inbox-based and computer based information for research purposes, particularly when the owners of the computers or emails are no longer alive. The paper cautions that research ethical considerations should not be forgotten when dealing with access to the inbox of the dead.

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