

PROMOTING NATIONAL UNITY: THE ROLE OF THE NIGERIAN HISTORIANS

Ikenna Ukpabi Unya PhD

History Unit

School of General Studies

Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike

Umuahia, Abia State

bismarckaik@gmail.com

&

Oji Nnenna Onyeaka

Department of Social Sciences

School of General Studies and Basic Studies

Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana

Afikpo, Ebonyi State

nne102002@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The pursuit of national unity has been a central theme in Nigeria's quest to attaining true nationhood. As an integrative concept, national unity emphasizes the development of a common identity and social cohesion among individuals within a nation. One of the key mandates of history as a discipline is to help the people understand themselves better by promoting awareness of their past, including both internal and external relations. This study aims to assess and evaluate the role of historians in promoting national unity in Nigeria. The study adopts a qualitative approach, relying primarily on secondary sources such as books, academic journals, newspaper articles and other relevant literature to explore the concept of national unity. The findings of the study reveal that historians have played significant role in fostering national unity and building the Nigerian nation, though certain areas still require greater attention. The study concludes by advocating a more active role for historians, emphasizing that history offers a unique lens through which we understand the past. It recommends that historians consistently provide accurate historical insights and explanations that facilitate a deeper understanding of Nigeria's history and contribute meaningfully to the national project.

Keywords: National Unity, Promoting, Historians, Nation-Building, Role, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

National unity is a vital national concern that no serious government striving for genuine patriotism, security and economic stability can afford to ignore. The concept underscores a sense of identity and common values among citizens of diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious

background. Achieving national unity is a challenging task for both the government and the citizenry. As Gambari (2008) rightly notes, national unity is not a product of historical accident but rather, the outcome of deliberate efforts by visionary and determined individuals. Consequently, the promotion of national unity should not be left solely in the hands of few experts; it must be a collective responsibility in which all stakeholders, especially historians, actively participate.

Ajayi (1990) highlights the crucial role historians play in advancing national unity in Nigeria through the dissemination of historical knowledge. He asserts:

History interacts with the nation. For the nation is a product of history in the sense of historical circumstances and events; and therefore, the nation cannot escape from its past. At the same time, the nation is shaped by the effort of historians, among others, who try to establish the history of the nation, influence its group memory and seek to define its nationality -- that is, the essence of what binds its people together, what constitutes their identity, what makes them a people distinct from other peoples. Indeed, what historical understanding does essentially for any nation is to place its developmental predicament within rational time perspectives of human evolution. This is the utility value of history. History also helps people not to undervalue what they are and overvalue what they are not. It in turn provides confidence building strategy to any prostrate nation that is striving to grapple with present problems.

Fafunwa (1971) similarly appeals to both leaders and citizens of Nigeria to embrace the role of history in nation-building and national unity. He aptly states: "History is to a people what memory is to the individual. A people with no knowledge of the past would suffer from collective amnesia, groping blindly into the future without guideposts of precedence to shape their future course. Only a thorough awareness of their heritage allows them to make public decisions as they make their private ones". In the same vein, Ifemesia (1982) maintains that ignorance and mistrust among Nigerians can be significantly reduced through comprehensive historical knowledge. He argues that: "inter-group relations would be advanced if culture groups know enough about the backgrounds and antecedents of their neighbours; for that would enable the one to know the merits and defects of the other and so they can tolerate one another and interact with minimum of friction and conflict".

The importance of promoting national unity in Nigeria through the activities of the Nigerian historians cannot be overstated. A heightened historical awareness can foster peaceful co-existence, economic development, political stability and social cohesion. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to assess the role of historians in promoting national unity in Nigeria. To achieve this objective, the paper is organized into five sections. Following this introduction, the second section explores the concept of national unity and its foundational principles. The third section discusses the identity and functions of historians, as well as their contributions to national unity. The fourth section examines the challenges that hinder the realization of national

unity, while the final section offers policy recommendations aimed at reinforcing the role of historians in nation-building.

CLARIFYING THE CONCEPT OF NATIONAL UNITY

National unity refers to a condition where people from various cultural, religious, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds come together to serve their country with shared purpose. According to Ambali (2019) national unity is the foundation of any meaningful development a nation could record because it revolves around a society with unity of purpose and togetherness not minding the difference in terms of political affiliation, religion, tribe, culture and every other peculiarity that alienated us from one another. In his own contribution, Unya (2018) views national unity as a political construct that reflects the collective spirit and will of a group of people who agree to be part of the particular geographical area as a unit, for the purpose of governance and action on behalf of all.

Similarly, Onifade and Imhonopi (2013) define national unity as a communal relationship within a political space, achieved through initiatives that respect cultural diversity and promote dialogue, justice, and equitable distribution of resources. Their argument is that unity must be consciously pursued through inclusive and fair policies to ensure national stability and prosperity.

If national unity has a goal of uniting diverse groups, that goal must be intentionally pursued. This may be the reason why Obiozor (2015) echoes this by stressing that for nation-building to succeed in Nigeria, leaders must learn from pluralistic societies that acknowledge and manage diversity. The aim of national unity, therefore, is to create systems – values, institutions, and infrastructure – that reflect our collective history, protect our present, and secure our future. Achieving this requires committed leadership and guiding principles such as shared identity, inclusion, respect for diversity, economic equity, good governance, and public awareness. In essence, unity is a continuous process demanding commitment from citizens, communities, and government alike.

Brigadier General Sani Usman (2025) strongly argues that that national unity is the foundation of meaningful development. He emphasized that Nigeria's past sacrifices, particularly the three-year war, highlights the value placed on preserving our unity. Usman contends that a united Nigeria is better positioned to tackle its most pressing issues – especially corruption. He explains that when citizens view themselves as part of a common national purpose, they are likely to hold leaders accountable and demand transparency and good governance. In his view, national unity fosters a shared sense of responsibility, empowering the people to work together towards building a just, stable, and prosperous society.

Having explained the meanings of national unity, we shall turn our attention to knowing who is a historian and why historians' contributions are important in promoting the national unity in Nigeria.

WHO IS A HISTORIAN?

A historian is someone who studies, interprets, and writes about the past, often regarded as an expert in historical knowledge. Historians use written records, artifacts, and oral histories to understand human experience. Some historians are recognized by publications or training experience (Herman, 1998).

To be considered credible, historians must possess the following seven attributes:

1. The historian must treat sources with appropriate reservations;
2. The historian must not dismiss counter-evidence without scholarly consideration;
3. The historian must be even-handed in treatment of evidence and eschew “cherry-picking”;
4. The historian must clearly indicate any speculation;
5. The historian must not mistranslate documents or mislead by omitting parts of documents;
6. The historian must weigh the authenticity of all accounts, not merely those that contradict their favoured view; and
7. The historian must take the motives of historical actors into consideration (Schneider, 2001).

Apart from these seven attributes of a good historian mentioned above, Stearns (1998) identified the following as skills one can acquire through historical competence.

The Ability to Assess Evidence: The study of history builds experience in dealing with and assessing various kinds of evidence — the sorts of evidence historians use in shaping the most accurate pictures of the past that they can. Learning how to interpret the statements of past political leaders — one kind of evidence — helps form the capacity to distinguish between the objective and the self-serving among statements made by present-day political leaders. Learning how to combine different kinds of evidence — public statements, private records, numerical data, visual materials — develops the ability to make coherent arguments based on a variety of data. This skill can also be applied to information encountered in everyday life.

The Ability to Assess Conflicting Interpretations: Learning history means gaining some skill in sorting through diverse, often conflicting interpretations. Understanding how societies work — the central goal of historical study — is inherently imprecise, and the same certainly holds true for understanding what is going on in the present day. Learning how to identify and evaluate conflicting interpretations is an essential citizenship skill for which history, as an often-contested laboratory of human experience, provides training. This is one area in which the full benefits of historical study sometimes clash with the narrower uses of the past to construct identity. Experience in examining past situations provides a constructively critical sense that can be applied to partisan claims about the glories of national or group identity. The

study of history in no sense undermines loyalty or commitment, but it does teach the need for assessing arguments, and it provides opportunities to engage in debate and achieve perspective.

Experience in Assessing Past Examples of Change: Experience in assessing past examples of change is vital to understanding change in society today — it is an essential skill in what we are regularly told is our "ever-changing world." Analysis of change means developing some capacity for determining the magnitude and significance of change, for some changes are more fundamental than others. Comparing particular changes to relevant examples from the past helps historians develop this capacity. The ability to identify the continuities that always accompany even the most dramatic changes also comes from studying history, as does the skill to determine probable causes of change. Learning history helps one figure out, for example, if one main factor — such as a technological innovation or some deliberate new policy—accounts for a change or whether, as is more commonly the case, a number of factors combine to generate the actual change that occurs.

THE ROLE OF HISTORIANS IN PROMOTING NATIONAL UNITY

“In history, a great volume is unrolled for our instruction, drawing the materials of future wisdom from the past errors and infirmities of mankind.” **Edmund Burke**

Historians play crucial roles in promoting national unity in Nigeria. This sub-section is devoted to discussing the various ways historians contribute to national unity in Nigeria.

History and historians played a leading role in the struggle that culminated in the independence of many African countries. The decades of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s marked a period of intense agitation for African independence, with many countries achieving sovereignty by the early 1960s. Through the platform of the humanities, African historians and scholars -- including Jan Vansina, K.O. Dike, Peter Abraham, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Aime Cesaire, Camara Laye, S.O. Biobaku, Chinua Achebe, Ade Ajayi, Wole Soyinka, Tafawa Balewa, Christopher Okigbo and others vigorously opposed colonialism. Drawing on indigenous culture, literature, history, and religion, they sought to reinterpret traditional African customs, beliefs, and values within the modern context of twentieth-century Africa. These intellectuals were committed to restoring Africa’s image from European misrepresentation and confronting the disruptive legacies of colonization, the clash between African and European culture, and the eventual calls for independence (Ekong and Akpan, 2019).

Advocating passionately for the value of historical studies and the role of historians, Uya (2012) emphasized that the study of African history must aim at liberating the continent from

oppression and underdevelopment. He argued that African history should not merely describe current underdevelopment, but should help transform it by offering historically grounded solutions. Echoing this perspective, Uya cited Rodney (1972), who asserted that:

History must deal with the past with a view of explaining the present. Hence, it must not be only descriptive but also analytical: it must not deal only with objective developments but also bring the discussion to the realm of value judgments. In this regard the past should be regarded not as a mere object of contemplation, but rather as an instrument to mobilize the present and to discard what is irrelevant to today's concerns.

Nigerian historians promote national unity through their teachings on nation-building and national integration. For instance, Ifeanchio and Nwagwu (2009) lamented that Nigeria's efforts at achieving integration have remained largely unrealized. It was as a result of this situation that made Gambari (2008) to assert that Nigeria will achieve genuine integration beyond the use of jingles and rallies if only the leaders can learn from history and historians. Learning from history entails an understanding of how people and events of the past have influenced the ways in which people live and behave. Learning from history will quicken our patriotic and national loyalty towards Nigeria and not region or religion. In supporting Gambari's position, Ikime (2006) feels that the government got it wrong by neglecting history and historians and laying much emphasis on science and technology. According to Ikime:

Unless care is taken, unless every effort is made to maintain a proper balance between the pursuit of science and the pursuit of other desiderata of national growth, we may well find that we have science and technology, but no nation for science and technology to serve! What do I mean? Look at the history of developed nations of the world. I believe you will discover that, without exception, these nations had first to attain true nationhood before they set their tracks for full technological advancement. Britain, Germany, France, America, the Soviet Union, Japan, China, and others – each and every one had to go through the turmoil of nation-building before they attained their greatest heights in technology.

Apart from the issue of nation-building, Nigeria also needs the help of historians in promoting national unity by their informed teachings on ethnicity. Ethnicism, as it manifests itself in the public and private sectors of our services and economy, is a product of history. A certain knowledge of history would make all of us just little less bitter against one another. But how do we get this knowledge of history to the generality of our people? Ikime (2006) understands that ethnicity is one of the major challenges facing Nigeria, he thus, pleads that historians should allow history influence their thinking about their fellow Nigerians and our assessments of them. "This country" according to him "will never know true peace and unity so long as ethnic arrogance, born of no known major achievements, rules the hearts of those who lead us. And without peace and unity we most certainly will not move forward in meaningful development. Let no one or group think of himself or themselves more highly than they ought,

when all that makes them proud is some historical accident of a former slave returnee who taught their fathers or grandfathers how to read and write in the white-man's way. History holds the key to that understanding in a way that no other discipline can claim. Let us give History a chance to provide that understanding".

The creation of national identity that transcends ethnic and regional boundaries is one of the greatest responsibilities of the historians in promoting national unity in Nigeria. It is a well-known fact that two developments in history of the black man undermined his self-respect and blurred his identity. One of these was the trans-Atlantic slave trade which not only sapped our man-power and so undermined our development for four centuries, but also conferred on us an inferior status in our relations with the white race. Tragically for us, the end of that trade was followed by developments which ended with imposition of European colonial rule on Africa. Colonial rule ensured that African genius remained undeveloped for nearly another century. We thus had five centuries during which we virtually stood still development-wise while the rest of the world left us behind. It is only since independence that Africa has been seeking to take off again from where she left off five centuries back (Ikime, 2006). It is therefore, the role of the Nigerian historians to focus on these aspects of our past that are usually ignored in order to re-invent our identity, give us a new pride in ourselves and provide the intellectual backing similar to the motto of the University of Nigeria which is to: "restore the dignity of man".

Addressing historical grievances in a way that brings permanent solution amongst the groups involved is one of the ways historians contribute to national unity and nation building. Historians through their deep historical insights always shed light on historical injustices and inequalities, thereby helping in addressing the root causes of the conflict and achieving more just and equitable society. It is an established fact that past history and past glories of a people can influence the perception of the various groups which can become a threat to national cohesion and stability of the country. This may be the reason why Ikime (2006) admonished the Nigerian historians thus:

The historians must be aware that this is the nature of his subject; that the way he plies his craft can predispose his readers towards arrogance or humility; towards tolerance or intolerance; towards accommodation or insular exclusiveness. Given the multi-national state of Nigeria, the historian of Isoko, the Niger Delta, the Bini, the Urhobo, the Igbo, the Hausa-Fulani, the Yoruba, the Efik, the Esan and others, must remember constantly that he is also thereby the historian of Nigeria that is made up of groups other than those he is studying. Without being unfaithful to his evidence, such a historian, if he is indeed persuaded that he has a role to play in nation-building, including the promotion of national integration, must eschew emotionalism and over-glorification done at the expense of other groups. Blowing past glories out of proportion in an effort to score cheap political points in the context of today's realities is a disservice to History; a crime against the nation that we are seeking to build.

Again, another great role historians play in promoting national unity is in the preservation and promotion of our collective cultural heritage. Historians do this by holding conferences and seminars where participants and the general public are encouraged to promote native languages learning and speaking. Historians are also admonished never to decline any invitation to speak during cultural ceremonies such as New Yam Festival and other traditional ceremonies in order to keep our cultural heritage alive. To permanently preserve our oral history and culture, historians should be in the forefront in the documentation and recording of our different folktales, proverbs, songs and historical narratives which were passed down to us by ancestors. Identifying with our different traditional rulers should be encouraged and wearing our traditional attires both in the office and during festivals will help in making historians promoters of national unity and nation-building in Nigeria.

Historians play a vital role in strengthening national unity by emphasizing the importance of good citizenship in their teachings. This is one of the most common justifications for the inclusion of history in our school curriculum, as it lays foundation for responsible citizenship -- citizens who are not only loyal to the state but are also patriotically committed to the service of their fatherland. Furthermore, through their teachings and participation in policy symposiums, historians influence the development of wise and informed leaders who understand both local and global historical contexts. Historians often remind the political class of the enduring wisdom of the 16th century political thinker, Niccolo Machiavelli, who advised in his seminal work *The Prince* that:

The Prince (in this context, Nigerian leaders) should read history, studying the actions of eminent men to see how they conducted themselves during war and to discover their reasons for initiating war and to discover the reason for their victories or their defeats, so that they can avoid (defeat) and initiate (victories). Above all, they should read history so that they do what eminent leaders have done before them: taking as their model some historical figures who have been praised and honoured; and always keep their deeds and actions before them....Wise Prince (leaders) should observe these rules; they should never take things easy in times of peace, but should rather use peace time assiduously in order to be able to reap the fruits in time of adversity.

Through this historical perspective, leaders are better equipped to make thoughtful decisions, ensuring their actions are grounded in experience and historical wisdom.

Finally, historians contribute greatly to the promotion of national unity in Nigeria through their numerous teachings and researches which emphasis the contributions of different ethnic groups and cultural areas. This ultimately helps in dispelling myths and stereotypes that fuel divisions and conflicts. Again, historians also use different social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, podcasts and others to share historical information that promote national unity. The

historian's major job as a teacher is to provide the information and explanation that makes understanding possible. Thus, the teachings, researches and writings of the historians must be accompanied by national philosophy for the teaching of History which insists that the purpose of History teaching at our level of development is to inculcate in those who learn it "a burning desire for national unity" (Daniels, 1972).

Having sufficiently discussed the various ways historians contribute to national development and unity in Nigeria, our attention shall now turn to the challenges they face in their quest to promoting national cohesion in Nigeria.

CHALLENGES FACED BY HISTORIANS IN PROMOTING NATIONAL UNITY

There is no doubt that Nigerian historians face serious challenges in their efforts to strengthen national unity in Nigeria. Several of these obstacles are outlined below. Lack of funding for historical researches both by our different institutions and the governments disrupt and limit the national relevance of historians. Practicing historians have always received calls from government functionaries requesting that historians should write the authentic Nigerian history without ever bothering to ask what it costs to produce such authentic history. Describing the situation the Nigerian historians have found themselves, Olusanya (1984) laments thus:

In fact, many Nigerian leaders, in their ignorance, regard history as a useless discipline, refuse to put money into historical research or support post-graduate studies with the result that there is a shortage of trained historians. Their belief is that all efforts should be concentrated on technological development which would win for us respect. What, however, is not appreciated is that a people weighed down by complex (and many of us still suffer from this); a people lacking in self-confidence cannot go ahead to make the type of contributions they are asking for. It is only when people fully believe in themselves and in their race; it is only when they are spiritually satisfied, and this can only be achieved by inspiration from the past, that they can make the much desired contributions to technological and scientific development.

The Nigerian historians are also confronted with lack of reading and referencing the works of their fellow historians especially the works dealing on national Nigerian history and development. For instance, Ikime (2006) asserts that "the historian's duty is to illuminate his own studies by reference to the works of others and the history of other lands. Every nation has had to battle with the issues of integration and development. The historian of Nigeria owes a duty to draw on the experiences of other lands as he seeks to deepen our understanding of our situation". If the Nigerian historians consult the works of others and reference them appropriately, it will aid their own contributions to nation-building process and widen the scope of their contributions.

Apart from the challenge of consulting fellow historians' works, the historians' greatest challenge is the government and government agencies. For instance, the historians can provide materials and analyses which, if deliberately and diligently applied, can lead to greater understanding, greater tolerance and a greater desire on the part of our multifarious peoples to work together more harmoniously for the common good. But the historians cannot perform magic or miracles; they cannot force our policy makers, planners and executors to use their materials. For instance, Katsina (2013) reports that the former Military President, Ibrahim Babangida did not find it comfortable when, in 1980s, he was trying to introduce World Bank/IMF designed economic policy, SAP (Structural Adjustment Programme) as a panacea to Nigeria's then dwindling economy, scholars, especially historians vehemently criticized the action. To weaken the strength of history from the bottom, his administration introduced Government as alternative subject in secondary schools to history. Therefore, the historians' contributions to nation-building and national unity can only be concretized when those involved in the making and execution of national policies care to read their works or call for, their volunteered services.

Academic incompetence is another challenge that is limiting the contributions of historians in promoting national unity and integration. To be sure, historians are trained experts. By virtue of their training, they possess special skills which differentiate them from other practitioners of other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. But in the recent past, it has been observed that many historians especially the newly breeds have not gotten adequate knowledge of the subject matter. This ugly trend is traceable to a flagrant abuse of the use of 'hand-out' as a veritable substitute to history text books, journal and monographs. This state of mental laziness amongst some historians have resulted to a situation where 'hand-outs' are printed without acknowledging the sources where the information emanated.

Delivering a paper during the Historical Society of Nigeria Week at the University of Calabar in 1982, Professor G.O Olusanya observes that mental laziness amongst historians is a problem most of our academics suffer. According to him: "there is the mental laziness from which many of our academics and potential academics suffer. It is not unusual for prospective post-graduate students to ask their lecturers as to what they can choose on so that they may obtain their post-graduate degree in good time". The ultimate end of this academic ignorance amongst the history lecturers is on the students – they are turned out as half-baked. A young historian may graduate, found worthy both in learning and character by his institution, but may not be able to practice his trade effectively and efficiently because of the limitations he has which is traceable 'handout school of thought'.

The absence of national history or the refusal on the part of historians to integrate the different local histories is another major challenge confronting the Nigerian historians. It was as a result of this limited appeal that made Aiswaju (1984) to say that there now need for two types of historical writing. First, the local histories, while they continue to be produced, must be rendered capable of leading to wider generalizations for the entire country or a large area of it. Secondly, a thematic approach is recommended, whereby subjects may be studied which have

wide or nation-wide implications. These macro dimensions must receive urgent consideration and their publication must be pursued equally urgently. One happy development in this direction is the *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, a project of the Historical Society of Nigeria. It is this dimension of Nigerian history focusing on the problem of integration that is capable of generating the right type of national awareness in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that national unity is a shared commitment by people within a given geographic area to work together as one political entity. History – and by extension, historians – play crucial role in building this unity. Daniels (1972) rightly stated: “that professional historians do not have any monopoly on the thoughtful study of human affairs. All of the other social sciences and humanities are engaged in this.... History, however, must be drawn upon by all other fields. It offers the raw record of what happened, and it sets the context of unique situations in the stream of time within which the other forms of specialized inquiry must operate.

The study also examined how historians promote national unity through education, cultural preservation, addressing ethnic tensions, and more. Our plea, therefore, is that we let history influence our thinking about our fellow Nigerians and our assessment of them. This country will never know true peace and unity according to Ikime (2006) so long as our attitudes to our fellow Nigerians are dictated by ignorance and ethnic arrogance. We need to understand our fellow countrymen and women. History holds the key to that understanding in a way that no other discipline can claim. And historians are to use that key to open the door to understanding. However, when the historians had opened the door, they cannot force their countrymen and women to enter it. Hence, the role of the historians in nation-building and national unity is conditioned and limited by the readiness of the nation and their countrymen and women to be influenced by history and the historians.

Finally, Nigerian historians and the historians-in-training must recognize their powers to shape public opinions which indirectly influence key decisions made by our leaders and citizens. Therefore, they should consistently aim to present accurate, well-researched historical accounts that encourage unity and national pride.

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