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## THE NIGERIAN STATE AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF HISTORIANS

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### **Abstract:**

Since the evolution of the Nigerian State, failures in economic, political and social realms have been multifaceted and multi-dimensional. Historical trajectory in these series of failures has not been explicit. In certain perspectives however, these state failures might have been over-looked or over-exaggerated. Hence, what seems to be a turning point in the history of the Nigerian State might have been discussed, written and agreed by many Nigerian historians. Different points of controversial views, either conservative or radical, have been expressed with, of course, harmony and agreement within the community of historians. This paper examines the responsibility of historians, irrespective of their orientations, personalities and analytical methods, in constructing the faulty, ethnocentric and historical account of the past and contemporary Nigerian State. The need, therefore, to continue producing and reproducing professionals with ethical responsibility and historical irreducibility of the Nigerian political diversity becomes imperative for the stability of the Nigerian State. It is contended that the Nigerian modern state must be analyzed by historians in the light of the tedious, lengthy and protracted passage of time and with the application of the historical trajectories and distinct historicity of the evolution and development of the Nigerian State.

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### **Introduction:**

All history is ‘contemporary history’, meaning that history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems, and that the main work of the historian is not to record, but to evaluate; for, if he does not evaluate, how can he know what is worth recording? (Carr, E.H. 1984:15).

This paper attempts to explore the complex nature of the Nigerian state and show the responsibility of historians in providing historiography and the vital hyphen of

historical trajectories. The paper also explores the need for a critical reconstructing the account of the Nigerian state and explaining the nature of its instability. The responsibility of historians must go beyond giving the chronology of events but also providing a critical examination and assessment of why the Nigerian state remains unique or complex in meeting the needs of the large segments of Nigerians notwithstanding the enormous human and material resources. Hence, the role of the state and its actors must therefore be seen to have fundamentally impinged on Nigerians. The impacts of state policies and strategies on the citizens by the state actors, transmitted through governmental institutions, by politicians and bureaucrats, must be exposed to show that they are directly responsible for the setting of and therefore constituting Nigeria's drawback and backwardness. In other words, the politicians and bureaucrats must bear the full wrath of the people, contrary to what has been the general orthodoxical conception of the state.

It is therefore tempting but inadequate and misleading to exonerate the politicians and bureaucrats and other state actors for the failures of the state. This is perhaps a clear reflection of static conception of essentially a dynamic situation. Whereas other organs of the state like the legislature, law enforcement agencies, judiciary etc. are presented as adjuncts to the instrumentality of the state but in reality, these organs symbiotically influence each other and the state activity. Narrow perspectives on such issues cannot bring about understanding of the nature of the Nigerian state in the evolutionary process. This also limits our understanding of the natural and human endowments, the dynamics and complementarities of the structure of the Nigerian economy. In addition, critical social characteristics of the Nigerian population may not be comprehended if unnecessary constraints are deliberately imposed through policy making and execution.

### **The Nigerian State: General Issues and Perspectives**

Although certain features of the state have been more or less universally recognized, the eurocentric features and the form of evolutionary processes have continued to be contested with fierce academic flavour (Tornquist, 2004:14-25). Hence, such eurocentric perspectives of the state bring a wrath in the heart of scholars and consequently pose a threat in scholarly traditions towards understanding the nature of the Nigerian state. Radical historians have constantly challenged the notion of the state

constructed on ahistorical conception (Usman, Y.B. 1981). During the last five decades or so, for instance, the Nigerian state had witnessed an increasing upsurge in the responsibility of historians vis-à-vis the precarious nature of the state.

The state, among other things, promotes either democratic principles or dictatorial tendencies. The focus has been on the relationship between the state and subjects derived from the state's orientation. Some scholars have viewed this paradigm with skepticism while others feel that the polemics might bring about a new reorientation to adopt and project fresh theoretical reconstruction of and perspectives on the state (Martinussen, 1997:259-264). Based on critical examinations, important trajectories must attempt to broaden and deepen the existing explanations of the evolutionary processes and the impacts the Nigerian state has had on the society. They must also explain the reasons why the society has continued to remain in a state of unacceptable level of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, crime rate and backwardness. Thus, the focus on the state and its trajectories, contribute enormously in the reconstruction of alternative form or new options.

The predatory nature of the Nigerian state indicates that it is greedily destructive and ruthly aggressive with constant determination to steal. The Nigerian state as a monster has evolved to control almost everything in the economy. This has transformed the state to become too powerful, knowing no bounds and no restraints even against it. Armed with executive, legislative and judicial organs, the Nigerian state extracts massive resources by fiat, through state enterprises, institutions and agencies that have continued to be inefficient with waste, nepotism and the ubiquity of mass corruption. Many paradoxes occur in the Nigerian state with the failure to deliver goods and services. Oil refineries in the Nigerian state cannot produce refined oil for local consumption. The import-substitution industrialization in Nigeria has collapsed. Power, health care services, education, other services and infrastructures in the country cannot be guaranteed. This is coupled with high inflation rates and pervasiveness of state corruption.

Institutional positions in the Nigerian state are of course occupied by actors wielding enormous power. In certain circumstances, particularly in the distribution of power, power is also wielded by other actors who are completely outside the state institutions. All these dynamics bring about hegemony and remain fundamental in

evaluating the role and direction of the state. These also focus on power and pursuits of democratic politics (MacEwan, 1999:225-235).

The question raised by the nature of the Nigerian state is focused on the role or responsibility of historians in transcending historical trajectories. Hence, historians would need to change tactics as politicians and bureaucrats have continued to change situations to suit them by camouflaging their failures for the failures of the state. These failures have precariously plunged the Nigerian State into political and socio economic quicksand. The pervasive activities of the state through its actors have been expressed by Miliband. *More than ever before men now live in the shadow of the state. What they want to achieve individually or in groups now mainly depends on the state's sanction and support. But since that sanction and support are not bestowed indiscriminately, they must, ever more directly, seek to influence and shape the state's power and purpose or try to appropriate it altogether. It is for the state's attention or its control that men compete; and it is against the state that beat the waves of social conflict. It is an ever greater degree the state which men encounter as they confront other men .... It is possible not to be interested in what the state does; but it is not possible to be unaffected by it* (Miliband, 1969:1).

In Nigeria, due to a combination of historical and material circumstances, most of the citizens are deprived from enjoying a wide range of benefits and rights occasioned by the abundant resources available. These resources, due to the nature of the state, have continued to be diverted or channeled to other areas that do not have bearings on the basic needs of most Nigerians. This is in line with the expansion of the state's coercive influence and power particularly on what the state stands for and what constitutes its reality in the entire embodiments of the state system (Miliband, 1969:46).

State power lies in governmental institutions. These institutions are manned by individuals who occupy positions and wield enormous power. These persons position themselves in executive, legislature, judiciary, bureaucracy, military and other law enforcement agencies etc. These constitute the state elites that determine the state of affairs and at the same time undermine forces of social justice and enhancement of people's wellbeing. Central to the power of the state is history. The centrality of this

power lies in the strategic and constant manner the political power of the state always intervenes to either control or influence historicity.

Other components of the state elite outside the state system are the economic, political, traditional, cultural and academic segment that can be neatly compared with the state institutional elites. Both categories of the elites, either inside or outside the state system, comprise the dominant elites in the Nigerian state. Hence their relationships are, more often than not, mutual, complementary and symbiotic. The basic forms of interactions by the elites (outside and inside the state system) determine the nature and dynamic role of the state and its impacts on the society as a whole.

A critical account of the evolutionary process of the Nigerian state can be hinged on, of course, the construction and establishment of the Nigerian political state, the development of its structures, law enforcement organs and other institutions within the state system. Hence, the relationship between the Nigerian state and the responsibility of historians is an important foundation in the reconstruction of the Nigerian state system. This therefore encompasses the formal state institutions of power in the Nigerian political system particularly the political actors. These actors include, among others, those occupying executive, legislative and judicial positions as well as the bureaucrats, the military brass, other forces and the civil society organizations that challenge, seek or are given access to political-cum-economic power.

The path to statehood in Nigeria has been hobbled by decades of instability; policy inconsistency, contradictions, corruption and other forms of economic mismanagement. These, among other things, have made the authoritarian Nigerian state increasingly incapable of discharging satisfactory responsibility and duty to Nigerians. As the Nigerian state limps, endemic and protracted crises have continued to emerge despite huge resources that could have gone round to Nigerians equitably but for the vested interests of the elites. Thus, control of resources breeds fierce struggles that lead to instability in the state.

What therefore have been the broad trends in the evolution of the Nigerian state and the relationship of these trends with the historical construction by historians in the areas and concentration of state power since 1960? What trajectories can emerge from the crisis of the state and other forms of instability as well as the emergence of the military

junta in the mid 1960s up to the late 1990s that constitute a departure from the orthodoxy and mundane? Furthermore, what can be adduced from the emergence of the new forms of frustrations, confrontations and militancy against the Nigerian state power consequent upon its failures in various parts of the country? What methodological approaches should be adopted by historians in analyzing and assessing the Nigerian state system?

Various institutional elements of the Nigerian state and personalities occupying positions and wielding power in the bureaucracy, local government apparatus, national and state assemblies, law enforcement agencies, judiciary etc. have not always and critically been in direct focus. Thus, in evaluating the role of the Nigerian state, crucial consideration in the general distribution and use or misuse of power in the differentiated groups is fundamental in appreciating the political process and attendant national question. No doubt, the bureaucrats and politicians have continued to always hide under the shadows of the state. They use state agencies to unleash terror and other forms of deprivation and domination. The beam of history has seldom been visibly directed to these activities in Nigeria. This social category of people has continued to exert undue privileges of the state under the auspices of government despite all the semblance of checks and balances.

Politics, rooted in human nature, is essentially governed by state laws. The emergence of these laws is crucial in understanding how the state is governed through the operations of these laws. The nature of compliance or confrontation the state is constantly being challenged needs to be clearly understood. In politics, truth and opinion must be clearly distinguished to reflect the objective laws of the state and the substance of politics. However, within the landscape of politics, interest within the purview of power is paramount. That is why political actors and politicians including the bureaucrats are all unified in thoughts and actions, in the context of promoting or projecting and protecting underlying interests within the confluence and expression of state power in the political system (Morgenthau, 1978:4-15).

Other actors within the political system provide the vital continuity, dynamism and safeguards, despite the varying fractionalization of interests within the entire state actors, particularly in the political succession struggles and conflicts. Thus, the essence of politics is indeed interest irrespective of time and space in the entire gamut of human

activity. Harmony of interest is the enduring union among individuals and nations. In other words, the absence of clashing interests brings about a unity of purpose and ensures impervious bonds. The nature of interests that determines political action in a particular history of a state is largely dependant on the political and economic or even social circumstances within which the state emerged and plays its role. Political and economic settings therefore determine the content and manner of the use or misuse of power; the power or ability to establish firm control of man and resources. This power, no doubt, consists of the corresponding or appropriate relationships that serve in meeting the ultimate objectives of the state and its actors which range from exerting coercive violence to the psychological or material control of the mind or at least through the constitutional provisions and manipulations.

### **The Responsibility of Historians:**

Why are we constantly enquiring on the role or responsibility of the historians in the complex and dynamic state like Nigeria? Since we expect the past events to provide clear explanations of the present with a scientific projection and forecast into the future, the challenge before historians is enormous particularly in organizing authentic past to have bearings on the present and a reflection in the future. More than ever before, the responsibility of the historians to the state has assumed much wider dimensions as a result of the social expectations in providing a guiding focus and direction. Hence, whoever thinks about the nature of the future and possesses the authority to own the past, invariably owns the credence of the present and inevitably owns the future and those in position of power. Since historians are the keepers and protectors of truth and justice, they are in a position to upset and dislodge the powerful no matter how ideologically hegemonic (Ortiz, 2004).

Historians have to carefully examine and analyze the Nigerian state built on fierce struggles to accumulate wealth resulting in conflicts, violence and all forms of manipulation, domination and deprivation. However, dysfunctions of the global political order and the strategic designs of foreign policy state actors overtime must also be taken into consideration. Why then have the self-esteem of national self-determination and other forms of national liberation been continuously sacrificed? For decades, historians have endeavored to uncover and at the same time resolve these issues with different points of

views expressed or articulated. Of course, historians consistently disagree. The trends in disagreements among historians are in micro and macro levels as well as in national and international perspectives with orthodox and radical views. Since historians differ over various historical events, various views are expressed and therefore imply that historical process remains flexible with consistency only to be found in disagreements (Konzett, 2005). This suggests that the historical disagreements on Nigerian state are in consonance with the flexibility of history. Hence, the relationship between the state and history is an important aspect in the foundation of any society.

Since the Nigerian state encompasses the formal institutions of power, the responsibility of the historians in tilting the existing orthodoxy is crucial in transforming the state and its actors. Historians are therefore constantly charged with a vengeance of the state direction and role (Davis and Walkowitz, 2007). The assumption of this state role has put the historians with that historical responsibility to state service in the art and science of skillful telling the truth as well as being positioned in the vanguard of liberty and freedom. This is a mission that has to be attained notwithstanding the inherent constraints and difficulties. The responsibility of the historians has for a long time been appreciated and has assumed such a critical level to the services of the state, particularly in resolving state crises and establishing stable good governance.

The antiquity of systematic and organized duty of silence, found in ancient societies, must be rejected by historians (Jeanneney, 2008). It is therefore a sacred responsibility of historians to vehemently reject the *duty* of silence. To be silent is to keep quiet or close one's eyes, block one's eyes or even to be told to shut up in the face of glaring events and truth in the state. Thus, there must never be an occasion when the integrity or role of the historians is being questioned for just keeping mum in the state of affairs of the state. Historians with historiographical skills and professional ethics must refuse to shut up and forget. Historians must, as a matter of necessity and design, directly partake in the affairs of the state in order to change the face and phase of the state's orientation and democratic politics.

What therefore should stir up historians of the Nigerian state over the past 200 or more years since the Sokoto revolution, the overthrow of the *sarauta* system by the British imperialism and the era of colonization etc? What vital issues or historical



trajectories that relate to the fundamental national question, particularly which focuses on the relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed and the entire mechanisms of acquisition of power? Thanks to the works of Abdullahi Smith, Yusuf Bala Usman, Mahadi Adamu, Mahmud Moddibo Tukur, Dahiru Yahya, Abdullahi Mahadi etc because they could not afford to take the option of silence. The role central to the responsibility of historians in the state centers on whether they have written or exposed what is supposed to be written or exposed. Are historians politically biased to the extent of questioning their role and whether they have respected the facts and presented them well? As academics, have their works been found unscientific, irritating, inciting, provocative and other forms that threaten the survival of the state?

No one is likely to launch an attack on historians that can be hackneyed unless historians fail in their responsibility, particularly in the exercise of their intellectual and professional ethics, to organize shared memory designed to cast or illuminate light on the versions of past events as well as reflect the past traces. In exercising such tasks, historians cannot afford to cut themselves off from contemporary events and movements particularly in the dynamics of politics of the Nigerian state. More often than not, historians dramatically withdraw from local events and movements and focus more on national issues. There are of course those that directly intervene in both domestic and international movements and events. The responsibility of the historians is very diverse and crucial. Historians are nonetheless equal to the tasks unless they want to remain silent and limit themselves to the anecdotal history.

Historians are continuously being challenged and called upon to directly intervene in fundamental or even controversial matters of the Nigerian state for the benefits of the citizens and in the interest of the survival of the state. It must be stressed that the knowledge of antiquity should not be an impediment to historians in the clarion call to national duty particularly in grave national crisis by applying contemporary methods of analysis and interpretations. For instance, fundamental confrontations and militancy against the state have featured and played a central role in the history of contemporary Nigerian state that continue to manifest in violent conflicts between and within the varied versions of the Nigerian nation. Hence, personalities predominantly involved in Nigerian politics could perhaps explain its low morale and conflict – ridden Nigerian state with

unsatisfactory or total failure in the provision of basic services as well as the lack of zeal and patriotism to the fatherland. What happens is self-service first, not the people.

Historians must accept to be involved, as their profession dictates, in all aspects of the totality of man's activities over time and space. Every aspect of their endeavours must exhibit the use of their professional competence and accept facts and stand by them no matter what (Sanks, 1981: 1-3). This is in order to discharge that primary responsibility of enlightening the public about any contending issues with a view to resolving and shaping the course of events and movements as well as perfecting a complete circle of historical accounts. This responsibility must transcend the orthodoxy of historical research and other forms of obligations or rituals most popular in the ivory tower. Hence, historians must be highly splendid, steady and effectively efficient in their response to national or state duty in order to ensure the triumph of justice and truth in the enthronement of a democratic state.

With all sense of determination, historians must strategically intervene in the public life of the Nigerian state by drawing their professional ethics and emblemizing their distinctive badge to the state. This typical identity and quality indicate patriotic support for the cause of the Nigerian state. By ensuring the triumph of justice and truth, historians must continue to struggle in the establishment of a just and egalitarian society against the forces and state actors opposed to it like the pseudo Nigerian nationalists, separatists, regionalists, tribalists, ethnic jingoists and the sectional media. It only requires the courageous and committed historians to attain this height.

Even though historians, based on their professional ethics, cannot claim to possess monopoly in bringing the truth to light, but they will fail in their responsibility if they fail to separate the grain from the chaff, in other words the truth from falsehood. For instance, the Nigerian State should be analyzed within the context of the evolution of various civilizations with identification and analysis of common or diverse features within the modern Nigerian societies. This should portray what actually has hampered the development of productive forces and the concomitant relations of production as well as the evolution of the corresponding mode of production. Many features within the Nigerian state are of great concern here especially the weak social and other forms of cohesion, agricultural and industrial development etc.

However, historians must apprehend the historicity of what the Nigerian state is confronted with, especially the problem of inequality, deprivation domination and poverty (Yahya, 2010). These issues must be x-rayed at different historical conjectures since the evolutionary processes of contemporary Nigerian state. Have these systems derived any correspondence and links with the classical social systems and class relations found in Western societies? All these must be grasped in the context of Nigerian realities. Are these mere social differentiations and not classes crystallized with fierce struggles, antagonism, competition etc.

With regard to the role of religion and the paradigm attention shifted in the construction of democratic politics, how have the various dimensions of the manipulation of religion shaped the tune and velocity of politics in the Nigerian state? To what extent has ethnicity, regionalism, stateism and other primordial tendencies contributed in further escalation of militancy, instability and endemic crises in the Nigerian state? Hence, by combining all these forces it will provide a lead in the search and identification of several historical trajectories which give substance and form to politics and the state. It will also provide the nature, form and sources of frustrations and confrontations within various segments that threaten the survival of the Nigerian state. Combining all forces and factors must subject the historians to have a critical overview of the external actors and organs who maneuver men and governments, under the aegis of imperialism and neo-colonialism, popularly transformed as globalization, causing unprecedented political, economic, social and cultural crises. The responsibility of historians is very crucial in integrating the long term and comparative historical perspectives simultaneously with how the Nigerian state and corresponding political system have evolved and produced such paradoxes. The specific and divergent historical trajectories will no doubt explain the emergence of different political actors and their mission in Nigerian State, fulfilled or betrayed.

Since history, as claimed by Pau Valery cited in Jeanneney 2004, “is the most dangerous product that the alchemy of the intellect has created” because “it intoxicates people, endangers false memories in them, exaggerates their reflexes, preserves their old wounds, and torments them in their rest” (Jeanneney, 2004:2). Accordingly, Valery further contends that historians are noxious because they open old wounds and are in a

position to contest and justify any cause of action. The historians' arsenal of defence against direct political involvement or any form of social intervention in the state of affairs is the effective use of their knowledge as well as their personal professional ethics strategically displayed to enhance their assertions on truth and justice.

In a predatory state like Nigeria, particularly since the 1999 democratic experiments, academic historians, as watchdogs of the state, must never retreat from the political struggles and emancipation in the orgy of democracy or democratization processes in the country. The problematic of democracy and democratic process must be deconstructed to be conceptualized not a matter of survival and *do-or-die* affair (Lumumba-Kasango, 2005: 1-22). Historians must set themselves the tasks of intellectual activism-cum-political praxis without minding that they would be affected by political consequences. Hence, by virtue of the fact that historians focus on the totality of human activity they draw experiences on the past. Thus, that the past stands distinct in understanding and dictating the form and interconnections of the political and democratic life of the state. National interest should therefore weigh heavier and primary more than anything else, all things being equal. This must involve inclinations towards inculcating the spirits of patriotism and prevent any attempts to wither away the Nigerian state or turn it as a failed state. Consequently, it must bring a new thinking in the foundation of democracy and democratic practice (Schraeder, 2004: 226-240).

Within the democratic environment of the Nigerian state, the responsibility of the historians is essentially to redirect, reorient and clarify the thoughts of all those engaged in political activity through their work and duty to the state. This also involves setting the standard pace and motivating or inspiring other academic in the partisan politics of the state. It is also their responsibility to enlighten the electorate and transform them as vanguard in the political terrain for the cultivation of democratic politics and good governance. When those engaged in the instrumentality of statecraft, particularly the politicians, are obsessed by history, historians would respond and alert them (the politicians or political actors of the state) against the tempting syndrome of repetitions. It must be stressed that nothing ever begins over and over again in the same way and fashion because history does not repeat itself. Thus, what follows afterwards is always new with its new challenges and dimensions.

Politicians can be dealt with prudence and irony in the diversity of issues of the past that are preponderant and cannot be easily refuted or manipulated. The arsenal of arguments historians must display should not bring conflict to politicians through documented history that serves in not only enlightening the political actors in the exercise of power but at the same time remind the state to be consciously aware of itself and its detractors. This in addition should serve as a vital link between history and the question of national identity and integration.

The political history of the Nigerian state must provide awareness of check and balance designed to prepare patriotic state actors and politicians with historical ballast in order to leave a mark of honour so that they are not exposed to float on the surface of events of history and to be washed away easily. This responsibility of historians must transcend the political leaders to the entire citizens enlightened through history books so that the tasks of sharpening the perceptions of the politicians and the entire citizenry are effectively and productively attained.

### **Conclusion:**

The Nigerian state known with a history of conflicts and other forms of criminalities committed by the state actors cannot be worked over by history. The issue is that historical judgment would have to sort out those events and put them in their proper perspectives because conflicts threaten national unity and stability. Thus, Nigerian historians grappling with the issue of collective responsibility of the entire people must appreciate the dimensions and implications of the perpetuation of ethnicity, ethnic conflicts and other forms of militancy in the country. They must also appreciate the dangers inherent in the spree of globalization in the Nigerian state. In the protection of public interest and in the light of casting on the deep forces that bring about these ethnic antagonisms, historians have to device and create a new philosophy for a new state with a desire and firm declaration to live together.

History, based on the ethics of truth, works in mysterious ways towards mending battered social relations of people to achieve harmony and greatness as well as overall progress of humanity. Historians must look for the distorted and omitted parts of our history. What has or has not changed and what needs to change or why nothing has changed must be examined by historians rationally, without emotional attachments and

with objective and acceptable conclusions. The responsibility of the historians is so great that the thinking about the nature of the future has helped them to edge towards truth and ahead of others. To think is to strive to find out, that is the responsibility of historians. That is why Carr stresses that... *one should not commit the solecism of calling oneself a student of history or a historian. The study of history is a study of causes. The historian... continuously asks the question, why?; and, so long as he hopes for an answer, he cannot rest. The great historian – or perhaps I should say more broadly, the great thinker – is the man who asks the question, why?, about new things or new contexts* (Carr, E.H. 1984:81).

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