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History and Methodology in a Nigerian University

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Abstract

This work highlighted the challenges faced by graduate students of History in Nigeria. A major snag confronted by these students in writing M.A. dissertations and doctoral thesis at the Department of History, University of Ibadan, Nigeria (Ibadan School of History), is the issue of methodology and in particular, the use of theories. The Department decries the use of theories as anathemic to historical writing. This article seeks to interrogate the universal nature of history vis-a-vis the nature of history from the perspective of the Department. The questions raised by this research work include the what, when and why of the nature of historical scholarship at the University of Ibadan? How relevant is the position of the Department in the twenty-first century? What are the arguments for and against theory in historical scholarship at Ibadan? A school of thought argues that rational analysis and empiricism are central to the historian's craft. Based on this premise, can the historian write about the past without theories? History and the challenges of Methodology in Nigerian universities is analyzed based on the author's experience as a doctoral student at the Department of History. This research work concludes that the study of the past is not static, thus, the Ibadan School of History cannot afford to be static.

Key Words: History, Historiography, Theories, Methodology, and Ibadan School of History.

The Ibadan School of History was only interested in the study of history as an intellectual and academic exercise and ... it was not concerned with the use of history in solving problems that may face society. Critics have also accused the Ibadan School of History of not having been concerned with social and economic analysis (Osuntokun 2014, pp. 5-6).

Introduction

The Ibadan School of history was distinguished in the serious attention it paid to the knowledge and reconstruction of the African past. The Ibadan School is the acronym of the Department of History, University of Ibadan (formerly University College, Ibadan) that was established in 1948. It was home to several generations of historians who walked in the indelible footprints of their forebears. This School was committed to the writing of the 'African perspective of history' (Falola & Aderinto: 2010). As opined by Falola and Aderinto (2010), the Ibadan historians did not differ significantly in orientation from that of their colleagues elsewhere. However, observers of the writings from the Ibadan School of History and the conduct of researches from the department disagree with this position. Falola and Aderinto also acknowledge the criticisms of the School. In the words of Falola and Aderinto, "a criticism of from the left and radical scholars is that the school is basically conservative, that it looks at society from the perspective of elite privilege and fails to use scholarship to create change."

They went further to state that:

It is also taken to task for engaging in the mere collection of data about the past without providing a challenging ideological framework to study them, or at the minimum, a paradigm to make the data more meaningful. That the works often lack a theoretical perspective has been a common complaint, a view supported by such members of the school as E.A. Ayandele. ... the attribution "school" is dismissed as too misleading a label for a group of scholars with an incoherent philosophy, ideology, or mission.

The department has remained conservative in its approach to the writing of history. There was I writing my doctoral thesis titled: *Gender Relations in Ikaleland of Southwestern Nigeria in Historical Perspective, 1900-1999*, (Adesina: 2010) in the 'Ibadan School of History' "where social and economic analysis was not the focus of its historical research" (Osuntokun 2014). The task of the historian at the 'Ibadan School of History' remained purely the recapturing of the African past, mostly from the political angle. My writing was not just aimed at recapturing the past but engaging the socio-cultural constructions of gender and the power relations in Ikaleland of Southwestern Nigeria. This thesis was microhistorical in its outlook specifically within the framework of one of the new fields of historical study – gender. Geographically, the Ikale territory covers an area estimated to be approximately 485 square miles (Bajowa 1993, 3). They populate part of the area extending from the coastal lagoons to the rain forest of Southwestern Nigeria – the home of the Yoruba (Obayemi 1971, 220). The Ikale communities are Ikoya; Osooro; Ode-Irele; Omi; Ode-Aye; Idepe (Okitipupa); Erinje; Iyansan; Igbodigo; Igbinsin-Oloto; Akotogbo, Ajagba Iju-Osun and, Ayeka (Akinnaanu 1994, 1). The immediate challenge I faced was convincing the present

custodians of the school that my research work was history. The immediate reaction to my research topic was that the subject was not a viable subject of inquiry in history.

Methodological Challenges

The study of the past has never been static. The practice of history has witnessed many shifts and turns in the way it is thought and undertaken. Since the 1960s, for example, the discipline of history has experienced a 'social science turn', a 'cliometric' or 'statistics turn', a 'women's history turn', a 'cultural history turn' and so on. These are not novelties that have not come and gone. Each has remained a significant way for historians to reflect upon and write about change over time. But, in all this one thing has apparently not altered. This is the epistemology of history. In spite of this rich variety of methodological developments or shifts and turns of interest, the foundational way historians 'know' things about the past has been unchallenged. Despite the use of statistics, the new themes (society, women, gender, culture) and the application of fresh concepts and theories, there remain two steady points in the historian's cosmos: empiricism and rational analysis. (Munslow: 2001)

As a follow up from Munslow, this research was not strange to the discipline of history. At the end of my field work and literature search I was confounded by lots of challenges that ranged from historical methods, frameworks to adopt for my writing, language, and the viability and acceptability of my study. More importantly, at the Ibadan School of History, I was confronted by faculties with numerous questions. These questions often began with: What is the proposed title of your thesis? When I said it is, "*Gender Relations in Ikaleland of South-western Nigeria in Historical Perspective, 1900-1999*". My attention was always drawn to the connotation of gender as requiring social science methods and theoretical framework which disqualified my work as a historical piece. At this point, my experiences as a graduate student was best captured by a graduate student who stated that:

What we appreciated as graduate students also connects with what we disliked in our training and deplore in the profession today: "its intellectual narrowness", "its lack of theoretical grounding", and a "very narrow, book-by-book, footnote by footnote approach to teaching graduate courses," ... This form of "doing history", severed from society and "intelligent non-professionals," makes the practice of history barren and useless... (Scott 2012, 1093)

The humanities field in Nigeria to which history as a discipline belongs was built on the tradition of the Liberal Arts as distinct from the Social Sciences. Sometimes, I found faculties telling me my research work was not "viable" while some asked what I hoped to contribute to knowledge since scholars of Yoruba women's history had written myriads of aspects of Yoruba women's lives. Having read these scholars myself, I knew I had a lot to add to this body of knowledge. This is a microhistory of a sub-group of the Yoruba with its peculiar traditions and culture.

I was least perturbed by these queries because I was confident that my work was a work of history in a new sphere that the 'Ibadan School' had not engaged. The sphere of socio-cultural history had been identified two decades before I registered for a Ph.D.

programme at Ibadan, by one of the foremost scholars of the 'Ibadan School history' – Prof. Jacob F. Ade-Ajayi (1980, 35-36) in his article titled, "A Critique of Themes Preferred by Nigerian Historians". In this piece of work, Ade-Ajayi identified themes that were often avoided by Nigerian historians. One of these was Social History. He affirmed that Social History was:

a study of change in the pattern of daily life, the emphasis being on how people lived at different times in the past, music, dance, architecture, marriage, and family life they favoured; and what religion, in so far as this impinges upon daily life they favoured and the pattern of change in the totality of life that these imply.

He stated further,

The emphasis of Social History is not on politics or economics, as such, but on people, inter-relationships of people and how they live. This of course also borders on cultural history because social life is the essence of what distinguishes one culture from another and what also marks the transition from one culture to another.

While Ade-Ajayi (1980, 39) had stated that the use of "models and concepts as tools of analysis have become matters of necessity for the historian," the Ibadan School in the new millennium still dissuaded students from employing non-core history analytical tools through which historical processes can be explained and understood. At most times, these analytical tools were thought to be antithetical to historical scholarship.

While I continued with my literature search, I came across a very interesting scholarly work by Joan Scott (1986) entitled: "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis". According to Scott (1986, 1057-8), gender was a useful analytical category. She identified gender as a new department of historical research which was not in itself a sufficient analytical tool but required the employment of theories that will explain the concept of gender and account for continuity and change. Scott identified three common theoretical frameworks employed in gender analysis as Patriarchy, Marxism, and the French post-structuralist and Anglo-American object-relations theorists that depended on "these different schools of psychoanalysis to explain the production of the subjects' gendered identity." I was convinced my research topic was viable – my study is historical.

Joan Scott and Prof. J.F. Ade-Ajayi's position strengthened my resolve to pursue this new sphere of historical research. Thus, I commenced my study of the socio-cultural history of one of the least researched areas of Yorubaland. Hitherto, studies on the history and culture of the Yoruba had dwelt mainly on the issues of conflict, political institutions, warfare, and social structures. Ikale beliefs, practices and customs had been treated as an appendage of Oyo-Yoruba history, and gender relations in Ikaleland had equally been largely ignored. Thus, my study investigated the parameters of social structure that developed over a hundred-year period along gender lines among the Ikale-Yoruba people.

There is a sense in which Oyo-Yoruba history was made coterminous with the entire history of Yorubaland. The assumption that the Yoruba ethnic group is one has

rendered the systematic scrutiny of the culture and society almost otiose. This is in view of the fact that the Oyo constitute just one of the sub-groups of the Yoruba group. The frequent attention paid largely to Oyo-Yoruba history had robbed some of the sub-groups of their own identities. The history of the Ikale of Southwestern Nigeria has therefore been marginalized in the historical literature. A recent addition to the literature on Yoruba women by Marjorie McIntosh (2010) – *Yoruba Women, Work and Social Change* – is important to this regard. The central argument of McIntosh's work is that Yoruba women are noted for their economic activity, confidence, and authority. She particularly noted the active and vibrant nature of women's agency from 1820 to 1960. To her, Yoruba women were not passive victims but veritable social actors in society. The work clearly emphasised connections between women's duties within the household, their income-generation work, and their responsibilities in religious, cultural, social, and political contexts. This work is, however, another general work on the Yorubas that has not laid emphasis on the differing nature of women's agency in the other sub-groups of the Yoruba. The venture of writing the history of gender relations among the groups was also dismissed as a non-issue since male-female relations based on the Oyo experience had been well covered in the literature. However, just like the work of Laura Troiano (2012), my doctoral dissertation entitled *Gender Relations in Ikaleland of South-western Nigeria in Historical Perspective, 1900-1999*, submitted to the Department of history – The Ibadan School of History – of the University of Ibadan became an "experiment in the ways writing can inform, enhance, and challenge what is considered scholarship." It became my own story of how to work on neglected themes among a neglected group in a corner of Yorubaland usually neglected by Nigerian historians.

Telling the story of the relationship between men and women from a historical perspective among the Ikale who inhabit the present Ondo State of Nigeria has been very challenging. The incredible process of researching on this society has ultimately proved not only extremely tasking but also intellectually beneficial. Like Nwando Achebe in her detailed work of the gendered history of Nsukka, I argue that researchers cannot adequately study African societies without investigating the central place of women in the society. (Achebe 2005, p. 26).

Culture and Society in Ikaleland: Historiographical Neglect

Interestingly, the Ikale would provide a vital segment of the histories directing attention to the aspect of historical experiences ignored by the concentration on the 'general' or universal in the reconstruction of Yoruba history. In spite of the attempt to generalize the Yoruba experience, the great Yoruba historian, Samuel Johnson (1921, xxii) in his book, *The History of the Yorubas* recognized that the Yoruba, while displaying traits and characteristics peculiar to the race, also have things peculiar to each sub-group. For him, 'apart from the general, each of the leading tribes (sic) has special characteristics of its own'. This view found resonance in Ade Obayemi's (1971, 221) work when he affirmed:

To sum up, the south-east Yoruba, namely the Ondo, Ijebu, Ikale and Ilaje share, as it were, an internal unity manifest in certain traits which, with their geographical proximity, hold them apart from other Yoruba-speaking peoples, especially the north-west group.

The Harvard Professor, Kehinde Olupona (1991, 1995) in his seminal work and in consonance with the foregoing positions rightly stressed the need for a more regional study of Yoruba culture. This is because all too often, “previous accounts have homogenized regional differences or generalized from examples mainly drawn from Central and Western Yorubaland.” Universalism is commonly assumed to be the ideology of the Yoruba. It was thus obvious from the foregoing that for a proper understanding of culture and society in Ikaleland in particular and Yorubaland in general; there was the need to explore a range of cultural practices subsumed within the ‘Yoruba’ culture (Peel 2000).

During my *viva voce* at Ibadan, one of the examiners reacted with incredulity to the discussions going on about the Ikale. He demanded to read in particular one of the references, Paul Richards’ (1992) work, *Landscapes of Dissent- Ikale and Ilaje Country, 1870-1950*. However, the reaction to Ikale culture has always drawn such reactions from analysts and the general populace. Paul Richards (1992) in his work, *Landscapes of Dissent - Ikale and Ilaje Country, 1870-1950* succeeded in drawing attention to the everyday life of the Ikale. In spite of that, the Ikale have no doubt remained one of the most under-researched groups in Yorubaland (Oyegoke 1982; Akinjogbin and Ekemode 1976). The need to underscore this historiographical neglect has continued to arouse major academic interest (Ogen 2007). Olukoya Ogen (1998, 2003) a professional historian from Ikaleland, has started to put the Ikale narrative at the heart of historical debates in Nigeria. Many of his works now provide vivid descriptions of Ikale economy and society through the prism of the palm oil industry and Urhobo migrations. Even then, he has continued to do this within the context of male-dominated analysis, neglecting to fully take women into consideration. This is quite challenging, more so when it is obvious that the history of Ikale peoples and society can only be understood from multiple narratives, including the patriarchal, dominated and culturally marginalized perspective.

The Ikale: A Gendered History

Telling the stories of the relationship between men and women has proliferated across a broad range of disciplines with explanatory frameworks ranging from anthropological, sociological and even political. The inability of all these to evaluate the experiences from a holistic approach has made it imperative that gender relationships in our society be adequately captured from both a historical and empirical perspective. In several of the works done on Ikale history, little attention has been paid to oral interviews as a tool central to the production of knowledge in this area of research. As noted by Moore and Roberts (1990):

Talking with informants in the field lies at the methodological heart of Africanist history and anthropology. Historians and anthropologists rely on formal and informal interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and participant observation in order to generate data from Africans and to privilege an African perspective on society, culture, and change. Fieldwork serves both as a political statement empowering African voices and as a rite of passage for Africanists.

This approach has become extremely central to the study and understanding of the culturally ascribed notions of femininity and masculinity in Ikale society. But talking to Ikale women is a control and power issue. Thus, merely talking to Ikale women was

not enough; the interviewer must also be skilled in listening for 'silences' in encounters with them. Silences for the Ikale woman has been her strategy for survival and a negotiating tool in this patriarchal society. These women have overtime, constructed for themselves an identity expressed in the overwhelming belief that silence was vital for the Ikale woman to confront the challenges of modernity. Her clamour for education and empowerment are best attained by being submissive, which is expressed by her non-confrontation of the patriarchal structure. Thus, she maintains silence. The Ikale woman has been so used to the maintenance of silence that when she is being interviewed; at some times she keeps quiet, merely smiles, refrains from responding to the question, pretends she does understand the question, or simply moves away from the discourse to a safer subject. But, she is always quick to reiterate the importance of silence in her daily existence.

Ikale history has received scant attention in academic circles. A signal challenge for historical reconstruction of Ikale history, of course, remained the dearth of sources. A work on Ikale must, therefore, draw copiously from evidence provided by diverse sources (Fasan 2009, p. 79). In the few studies done on the Ikale, the inability to satisfactorily capture the specific circumstances of women's lives, particularly as it is related to their experiences in a highly patriarchal society inevitably led to the exploration of this aspect of Ikale history. The historical reconstruction and the outcomes on the Ikale have reflected a non-significant attention to women's needs and experiences. These works did not think that women should constitute an analytical category and in the places where they were mentioned, the patriarchal nature of the analyst comes into play.

The social foundations of Ikale pre-colonial economy highlighted the fact that pre-colonial economic activities were conditioned by kinship, age and sex roles. Historical reconstruction of the Ikale experience revealed the dissonance produced by this social encounter. The Ikale cultural, religious and judicial processes enabled the traditional structure to effectively regulate the relations of production and to guarantee unfettered access to the means of production. In spite of this, gender roles were well defined. Women were responsible for all domestic work but at the same time participated largely in farming, harvesting and the processing of food crops. The marketing of the crops also fell under their schedule. On the other hand, men were predominantly farmers, craftsmen and hunters. Land and its resources thus constituted the most crucial item in the economy of the Ikale (Otite 1979, 227). The vocation of fishing saw the equal participation of men and women especially among the riverine Ikale of Ijuoshun, Akotogbo and Iyansan. Above all, women were responsible for the processing, smoking and sale of the fish. However, there emerged very early among the Ikale of an overarching patriarchal control mechanism in the production process. This was noted by Ogen (2006, p. 334):

In some Ikale kingdoms such as Idepe, Osooro and Irele, there was a strong inclination towards patriarchal oppression. For instance, a practice known as *agban* system was prevalent in Ikale gender relations. The system was such that every wife was mandated to maintain two farms within a year. The proceeds from the first farm belonged to the husband while the second belonged to her. The husband merely helped his wife/wives in the clearing and felling of trees on the farms. Under the *agban* system, the husband provided

for the food requirements of his male children while the responsibility of feeding the female children was that of the woman except when she was unable to do so due to illness or old age. Meanwhile, the husband usually used the proceeds from his own farm(s) to acquire more wives, chieftaincy titles, houses and other properties...

The *agban* system lasted well into the twentieth century; a system that is peculiar to the Ikale. However, contrary to Ogen's views that the proceeds from the second farm belonged to the women, evidence proved to the contrary. According to Madam Theresa Emehin, (personal communication, December 23, 2005) the proceeds virtually belonged to the husband. The wife only kept the farm in trust for the husband. Several generations of Ikale women were socialized into this culture of service.

In addition, many of these works were constructed from homogeneity of experiences and, therefore, did not seek to differentiate in their analyses of the variables associated with continuity and change in society from the viewpoints of the different sexes. This, therefore, necessitated an account, albeit an original work, which relied heavily on primary data, most especially archival materials such as intelligence reports and personal papers, pamphlets, and bulletins. These foregoing materials were supported by the history of the cultural practices of the Ikale society which have been well documented in colonial archival materials deposited at the National Archives, Ibadan. The documents derived from the information gathered during the colonial period and after independence – among the Ikale, formerly under Okitipupa Division and later under Ondo State. Secondary sources such as books, journal articles, theses and long essays on Yoruba History, Women in Yorubaland and aspects of Ikale and Edo history, have been used to support the primary documents. These are derived from university libraries spread across the southwest of Nigeria. It is from the analysis of these and other data that conclusions were drawn, despite the fact that many of the materials failed to provide clear information on women's socialization into traditional femininity and cultural consciousness over the *longue duree*.

For the sensitive historian, the past lives in its changing forms, in the modes through which it is appropriated, time and again, by hegemonic and subaltern interests (Discussion 1990). In defiance of this perspective, the social and material realities of the Ikale women have suffered a serious neglect in the few works done on the Ikale. When attending to the broad experiences of the Ikale, a wide gamut of women's experiences is masked in what has become a clear under-representation of the gender experience in the historical literature.

The Limits of Yoruba and Gender as a Category of Analysis

According to Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997), in her book; *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, "the oppositional male/female, man/woman duality and its attendant male privileging in western gender categories is particularly alien to many African cultures" (Oyewumi 2004, 7). Oyewumi argues that gender is not fundamentally a social category among the Oyo-Yorubaland but seniority. In my study of the Ikale-Yoruba, it is evident that like the Oyo-Yoruba, seniority and not gender is "linguistically encoded" (Bakare-Yusuf 2004, 64) in Ikale language but male privileging is certainly not alien to this Yoruba subgroup. From available evidences from my research work, it is manifest that gender

analysis is not as simplistic as Oyewumi epitomized. Gender as a category of analysis is much more complex in social realities for women who have over the years interrogated their situations, developed various coping strategies, and negotiated patriarchy. Thus, Yoruba as a general category of analysis is inadequate given the different traditional practices of the various sub-groups of the Yoruba – a category, which to an extent is a colonial invention. The Yoruba as a social category is the creation of Samuel Johnson. (Peel 1989, 199) Peel stated that the Yorubas have come to know themselves as ‘Yoruba’ through the works of Christian Yoruba intelligentsia; Samuel Johnson. Peel (1989, 200) further argues that:

The Yoruba, like the Igbo and the Hausa, are one of the ‘mega-tribal’ groupings particularly characteristic of Nigeria’s vast, complex, and regionalized political system. As such, it is a modern category entirely, in that the vast bulk of the peoples who now know themselves as Yoruba, did not do so in 1900. Originally, the word referred to only one Yoruba grouping, the Oyo. Yoruba ethnic identity began to be adopted by other groups (e.g. Ijesha, Egba, Ijebu, Ekiti, Ondo) from the 1920s, as migration, cash-cropping, education and conversion to the world religions drew more people into a Nigeria-wide sphere of social relations. From the late 1930s, when nationalism really began to get underway, the Yoruba began to shape themselves politically against other ‘tribes’ especially the Igbo in the political crucible of Lagos.

In fact, as Spear (2003) as shown, in his definition of the tribe as “an exclusive, territorially bounded, self-conscious collectivity of people sharing a common language, history and culture”, the Yoruba can be categorized as an ethnic group with a conglomeration of tribes.

Several events in world affairs has affected altered the writing of history in Nigeria. Whilst the twentieth century saw the birth of the Ibadan School of History whose focus was on the nationalist agenda of writing the Afrocentric history of Africa, postcolonial events demands that the next generation of historians should interrogate the needs of Nigeria viz ‘human and economic development, political stability, promotions of democratic values, and so on’ (Falola & Aderinto, 2010).

Methodology and the Ibadan School of History

According to Osuntokun (2014), my thesis work, is one of the recent researches from the Ibadan School of History that depicts the School’s embrace of “historical modernity.” While this may be true to an extent, the school still frowns at the use of theories. It is the position of the School that History is the re-enactment of the true past. In the words of Jenkins, (1991) ‘the past has occurred. It has gone and can only be brought back by historians in very different media, for example in books, articles, documentaries, etc., and not as actual events.’ This task of the historian cannot be detached from the personality of the researcher, thus the multifarious nature of the historian’s readings of his/her sources.

Jenkins (1991) identifies three limits controlling the knowledge claims of historians, namely: epistemology, methodology, and ideology. These three elements portray the fragility of the historian’s task because no historian’s account can precisely correspond with the past, there are variations in the interpretations of historians. Historians can

only recover fragments of past events. There is the assumption that situating a historical research within a theoretical framework gives rise to subjectivity. This assertion is not entirely true to the extent that theories do not determine the information available in the primary, secondary, and other ancillary sources, rather, it helps historians to develop hypotheses, sharpen their research questions and analytical skills. The emphasis on pure narratives rather than a foregrounding in rigorous theoretical and analytical frameworks, perhaps, is responsible for Ekeh's (1980, p.11) assertion that the Ibadan School was 'limited in its potentials for further expansion and renewal.' Though the School overemphasizes the place of objectivity in historical writings, it must be borne in mind that the 'certaintist claims' (Jenkins: 1991) of objectivity 'are not – and never were – possible to achieve. It is important to reiterate that the Ibadan School of History should carry out its craft 'outside and beyond traditional programmes defined by political boundaries – the most pre-eminent approach of the Ibadan School in the 1950s and 1960s.' (Adesina 2012, p.11)

Conclusion

Since the Ibadan School seeks to re-enact the true past, then it should deal the 'plethora of competing theoretical approaches or 'paradigms' of historical inquiry' (Fulbrook: 2002). There are multiple theoretical approaches to historical investigation. They are Marxism, Structuralism, Discourse theory, Empiricist, Psychoanalysis, Subaltern, Feminism, Gender, Post colonialism, Postmodernism etc. These theoretical frameworks exist in historical scholarship, thus Fulbrook's (2002) assertion that the 'processes of historical investigation and representation are inevitably, intrinsically theoretical enterprises.' From the foregoing, it is evident that the Ibadan School of History's continued insistence on rejecting the employment of theoretical frameworks in historical writings, particularly with the realities of the twenty-first century; is misplaced. The study of the past is not static. The "Ibadan School of History" cannot afford to be static.

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