

UNIVERSITY OF PORT HARCOURT

**THE PYTHON'S EYE: THE PAST IN THE
LIVING PRESENT**

An Inaugural Lecture

by

PROFESSOR E. J. ALAGOA
Professor of History, Dean, School of Humanities
University of Port Harcourt

INAUGURAL LECTURE SERIES
NO. 1

It has become customary among most Nigerian Universities to adopt the European practice of making new professors deliver Inaugural Lectures. I am not exactly a new Professor, and the University of Port Harcourt has not always accepted what has become customary among other universities. However, I am grateful to my colleagues for selecting me to give the first inaugural lecture in the University of Port Harcourt.

There is one thing I like about Inaugural Lectures. The audience has no right of replay. It is not the same when I lecture my students. If I am merely talking “grammar” and making little sense, they protest vigorously. Sometimes the protest is delayed, and they return my “grammar” in the end - of-semester answer scripts.

I wish to stick to the tradition of the inaugural lecture by giving a statement of faith in my discipline. That is, we should define or redefine what we understand to be the meaning and nature of history, and its purpose and relevance for today. It is also necessary to give some account of my concerns as a historian, and how my understanding of history is to be applied to the teaching and practice of the discipline at the University of Port Harcourt. In other words, we need not only to state theoretical positions, but also to outline practical concerns and suggest means of realizing the purposes of our discipline in our community in our time.

The past may be dead, but we cannot bury it. There are some people who are willing to act as undertakers and wish to see the past disposed of for good. There are others who have made it their business to see that the past does not completely

disappear from our consciousness. I am pleased to count myself among this latter group. But for the majority of people everywhere, the past merely lives on in their present without any special effort or attention. For most people, the past is not a subject of special notice or interest because it is already such a normal fact of life in the present. The continued life of the past in the present is taken so much for granted that most people might even deny the fact of its relevance or significance for today. On the other hand, certain individuals or even entire communities could come to base claims to present status on the past achievements of their ancestors. Such persons would then form an exaggerated regard for the past must be condemned by those who wish to see the past buried, as well as by those who wish to see the best of the past live in the present. The opponents of history condemn such living in the past because it is against the real purposes of history.

-II-

What, then, are the true purposes of history? Our elders say ‘the long road is safer than the short-cut’ *Nungalá eteli numó dua*. Accordingly, we will get to the true purposes of history through the long road of first examining the objections of the opponents of history. First question we need to answer is, why responsible thinking people should wish the past dead and buried. The major objections to history have been stated very well by the seventeenth century French philosopher and scientist, Rene Descartes (1596-1650):

“To live with men of an earlier age is like traveling in foreign lands. It is useful to know something of the manners of other peoples in order to judge more impartially of our own, and not

despise and ridicule whatever differs from them, like men who have never been outside their native country. But those who travel too long end by being strangers in their own homes, and those who study too curiously the actions of antiquity are ignorant of what is done among ourselves today. Moreover, these narratives tell us of things which cannot have happened as if they had really taken place, and thus invite us to attempt what is beyond our powers or to hope for what is beyond our fate. And even histories, true though they be, and neither exaggerating nor altering the value of things, omit circumstances of a meaner and less dignified kind in order to become more worthy of a reader's attention – hence the things which they describe never happened exactly as they describe them, and men who try to madness of romantic paladins and meditate hyperbolic deeds”.

This statement contains three main issues that continue to be raised by historians themselves, and problems that they cannot yet say they have solved to the satisfaction of themselves, and problems that they cannot yet say they have solved to the satisfaction of themselves or of their critics. First, the accusation of historical escapism. That is, that historians lose themselves in the past and become ignorant of the present. Second, the problem of historical pyrrhonism. That is, the problem historians face of falling into a state of total doubt of skepticism concerning the validity of their accounts of the past. Historians need to show that historical methodology is able to produce accounts of what really happened in the past. Third, the problem with which this discussion is mainly concerned, whether or not history can be of any use to man in the present.

The objection stemming from the alleged unreliability of historical accounts of the past is that such accounts cannot be of any value, and can only succeed in misleading us. Fourth, historians are accused of building a world of fantasy, making things appear better than they really were. This is given as a further reason why action in the present based on historical accounts must necessarily be fanciful and unrealistic.

Since the seventeenth century, other philosophers have tackled the philosophical implications of Descartes' denial of the possibility of historical knowledge, notably, Vico in Italy and Locke and Hume in England. Historians of his own time in Europe did not accept Descartes' statement as a valid basis for a ban on history, but rather as a challenge and an impetus for the creation of a critical historiography. Historians took the view that the objections related to bad history, not to history as properly understood and practiced by professional historians. Thus the charge of escape into the past would apply to those who practise history as an antiquarian pastime, not to those who study the past from a knowledge of its relatedness to the present. That is, that the competent historian turns to the past from an understanding of its continuity with the present so that his understanding of the present assists his reconstruction of the past. An understanding of the past in turn gives the historian an anchor for a balanced view of the changing present. European historians following Descartes accordingly developed a Cartesian or critical historiography that attempt to overcome Descartes charges against history.

The problem of historical knowledge requires some consideration. Is it possible for historians to know what happened in the past? To answer this question, we may have to

ask the further question, how do historians operate in their search for knowledge of the past? Like other scholars, historians become active when they develop curiosity about something. Such curiosity should lead to the formulation of questions to which answers have to be found. The enquiry or search for answers takes the form of a study of documents, which are the evidence of past human activity. Historical documents or evidence appear to the historian in a wide variety of forms. They may appear as written information on paper, papyrus, tablets of clay, on monuments, or even rock. In Africa, the most significant documents may come to the historian in the form of oral literature or tradition, in intangible ethnographic practices and customs of communities, in the languages spoken by present populations, or in material objects such as artifacts from archaeological excavations or implements used in daily life or ritual. It is from his documents that the historian makes inferences, draws conclusions, and reconstructs or reconstitutes the past.

To the historian then, the product of his inferences from and interpretation of the documents from the past constitutes knowledge of the past. It constitutes knowledge in two senses. First, the evidence of the documents satisfies every reasonable person concerning the reality of the actions or events referred to. Accordingly, where the inferences made from the evidence are such as are compelling and convincing to the majority of historians presented with the same evidence, it is acceptable as knowledge of the past. Secondly, because the historian brings one piece of evidence into confrontation with another, and subjects each one to rigorous examination, he is able to obtain knowledge that is not immediately obvious as contained in any one of the pieces of evidence. It is in this sense that historical

knowledge may claim to possess a certain amount of autonomy. In this second sense, the historian may be said to make history or create new knowledge, not merely record the past or recount it.

The knowledge of the past that the historian can reconstruct or reconstitute from the documents cannot be complete, since he must necessarily work with incomplete records, and must also select from even such incomplete material. Because of this and the ways in which the cultural background of the historian affects his judgments, some doubts have been cast on the ability of historian to achieve absolute truth. The truth that the historian attains can only be provisional and not absolute and unchanging since the documents he uses can lead him only to a degree of probability sufficient to produce conviction in himself and the majority of his colleagues. Further, since the historian is in reality a student of change from a position in the present, his own conclusions cannot amount to certainties valid for all time.

Through the long road of historical methodology and the theory of historical knowledge, then, we arrive safely at the true purposes of history. The central purpose of history is to acquire knowledge of the nature and capabilities of man through a study of what he has done in the past. The past cannot be completely recovered, but the present is also not yet completely enacted and fully open to our view. We can only approach full knowledge of man in the present through a scrutiny of the record of his achievements and failures in the past. The past is, accordingly, the father of the present; and the past and present together provide the only basis for a prognosis of the future.

-III-

Is the knowledge that historians produce of the past useful to man in the present? Those who hoped to rule the world through their study of history have been disappointed in every age. They have discovered that history does not repeat itself, so that what they had learnt did not come round in a completed circle to enable them to take direct advantage of their foreknowledge. They have also been disappointed that they have not yet succeeded in distilling unchanging laws of human behaviour from history which they could use as political blueprints. The past does not create a present exactly in its own image. For this reason, a knowledge or consciousness of the past produces in the individual and the community a sense of proportion, a sense of perspective, and a certain type of wisdom in action. A proper level of historical consciousness provides an anchor for the community so that it does not get blown away by every wind of change or swept from its moorings by every new tide. The past provides a standard for the present as well as a starting point for forward movement.

Our own communities of the Rivers State have never had a doubt about the usefulness of their historical traditions, and the necessity for every individual to know something of community customs and origins. They have expressed their feelings concerning the relevance of a consciousness of the past in the present in their proverbs and aphorisms. Among the

Khana, a man who shows gross ignorance of community traditions or customs is termed “a son who did not get to know his father”:

Nwii a naa sua loo te

The statements has the double admonition for fathers to teach their sons the history and customs of the community, but more important, the responsibility of an adult to take steps to obtain knowledge of community history and traditions.

The Ikwerre also have numbers of sayings to the same effect. There are two that stress the value of historical knowledge for providing a deeper insight into current affairs. The first proverb states that “The eye of the man with local roots is (as penetrating as) the python’s eye”

Anya diálí bù ánya ekē

The second Ikwerre proverb is even more explicit and equally poetic in its admonition to study local history and tradition in detail and with diligence: “He who listens attentively will hear the footsteps of an ant”

Nye betèrù nsni kè ôma zô ônu ikítí-ôchi ndā.

Among the Ijò communities of the Niger Delta, regard for the past was enshrined in rituals for the ancestral dead, in the religious thought, and in explicit proverbial expression. Among several Ijò groups, ancestral shrines were effected for founders of Houses of lineages, in which various objects symbolizing the dead were preserved. Among the Kalabari and Okrika, figures representative of the dead, named **duein fubara**, were made and kept in the **ikpu**, or **opu wari**. The Okrika also made clay pots named **oko**, decorated with faces representing the dead.

More fundamentally, respect for the past roots of the community was embedded in Ijò religious thought. Ijò religion accords priority of being to the god of the earth on which the

community is settled, **amakiri**; and to the communal spirit, **ama-teme-suo**. These spiritual entities related to the history of the community have priority over other categories of gods or spirits. They have precedence even before the state high god, **ama-oru**. However, even the **ama-oru** or **amanyanaoru** is understood in historical terms as being related to the founding of the state, especially in the Eastern Niger Delta; and the amanyanabo institution, the traditions of the kingship, is closely related to this deity. Thus, state or community-wide festivals are usually concerned with one or all of these spiritual entities of a historical nature: **amakiri**, **amatemesuo**, and **ama-oru (amanyanaoru)**. The supreme being – **ogina**, **tamuno**, **ayiba**, **woyengi**, **tamarau**, - presides over all of the spirit and natural world.

Among the Nembe-Ijo there is the old saying that a man who does not know from where he came, must be of non-human origin:

Boyo nimighabo nondo

The name for the man who does not know his historical origins was **nondo**, and ape-like creature of legend which is believed to have lived in the mangrove swamps in ancient times. It is believed that some of these creatures had been domesticated by having their tails cut and were brought up with human infants. Accordingly, if a man was unable to name human ancestors over a genealogy of approximately seven generations, his neighbours would presume that he was descended from apemen. The significance of the proverb is the responsibility it placed on every individual to learn the basic facts of his historical origins.

In the philosophy of our people then, history equips the individual with the vision of the python, and with ears keen enough to hear even the soft footfall of the ant. Knowledge of the past enables a man to operate effectively in the present. In addition, history not only defines a man's identity, but also his very humanity. The past, and the knowledge of it that a man acquires, locate him securely in the present. Accordingly, the study of history is not a luxury, an interesting pastime, but an essential activity for the individual and the community.

-IV-

This deep commitment to the relevance of the past in the present that we find in our rural communities in the Rivers State is the authentic position for most of traditional Africa. This historical consciousness which regarded the past, the present and the future as a continuity has been eroded to a great extent by the direct and indirect effects and efforts of colonialism over most of Africa. Among other things, colonialism made an effort to capture the mind of Africa by setting it adrift from its historical past and its cultural roots. The attacks that colonial anthropologists and historians mounted against the idea of an African past and reverence for the ancestors were not by chance. They denied the African a history, ancestry or a useable past as a means of destroying his self-respect, pride, identity, and even his humanity.

It is not necessary to make an exhaustive catalogue of European postulates on African history. A few examples will suffice to give a general idea of the gravity of the attack on the humanism of the African. When the German philosopher, Hegel, developed his philosophy of history in a series of lectures in 1830, he gave only passing attention to Africa.

In his theory of world history, Hegel postulated a World Spirit realizing itself in the development of freedom through the history of world historical peoples. Thus, the idea of freedom had developed through the history of oriental peoples, through the Greeks and Romans to the Germanic or Western European peoples. According to Hegel,

“The history of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning”.

As for Africa, “it is no historical part of the world; It has no movement or development to exhibit..... What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature,... on the threshold of the World’s History”.

The most widely quoted recent statement on the absence of history in Africa is that of Professor H. Trevor-Roper of Oxford University. The Oxford Professor stated that what existed in Africa was darkness, and darkness was not a subject of history.

The only reason for citing these statements is to show that the denial of African history has been the work of scholars as well as of colonial administrators, travelers, and adventurers, racists, and propagandists. But the proposition that has created most trouble for African historians has been the idea that Africa has made no contribution to its own historical development, and that any trace of historical development that may be found on the continent had been introduced to it from outside by outsiders. This position was postulated as the Hamitic Hypothesis by Seligman in 1930. According to Seligman, “.....

the civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites, its history the record of these peoples and of their interaction with the two other stocks, the Negro and Bushman...” African historians have had so much trouble with the Hamitic Hypothesis because the Hamites are a pure figure of mythology like the NONDO of the Niger Delta.

-V-

African has not succumbed to the assault on its roots. Rural Africa largely maintained its integrity and did not get submerged by the anti-historical currents of colonial propaganda. For the sectors of the population that came under direct colonial influence, some used the skills of writing acquired in colonial schools to compile and record the traditions of their communities. In Nigeria, the most successful examples of this adjustment to the colonial challenge were Jacob Egharevba of Benin and Samuel Johnson of the Yoruba. There were others in other parts of Africa such as Sir Apollo Kagwa of Uganda. This aspect of what has been termed the ‘politics of survival’ in the face of colonialism was not a new phenomenon. Africa already had the experience of a foreign dominating historiography. Islamic or Arabic historiography came to the Western Sudan and Eastern Africa as early as the 9th century AD before the European intrusion by sea from about the 15th century. In both areas, local historians used the new orthography to compile collections of oral tradition. The Kano Chronicle and the Kilwa Chronicle are outstanding examples. The scholars of Timbuktu even developed their own tradition of historiography combining the Islamic with the oral tradition.

The problem of meeting the threat to identity and dignity posed by colonial denial of a past became a more serious problem for the academic historians and the political activists. Certain stages of development may be defined in the development of a historiography to combat the colonial threat. First was the historiography of self-assertion. Its practitioners were at first politicians rather than scholars and it was basically an attempt to meet the colonial propagandists on their own grounds. The history produced took the form of drum and trumpet glorification of ancient African Kingdoms and Empires. African nationalists such as Edward Blyden, Casely-Hayford, and Nnamdi Azikiwe tried to contain the effects of the charge of rootlessness by claiming to be the successors of the founders of the ancient African kingdoms, the fighters for African freedom, and the founders of the civilization of ancient Egypt.

The politicians of the period prior to and immediately after the winning of independence in the 1960s continued to recognize the historical dimension of the struggle. They maintained links with the new academic historians such as Kenneth Dike and Saburi Biobaku, who undertook to forge a historiography of decolonization. The historians for their part saw their work as related to the political and cultural slogans of the time such as “African personality” and “Negritude”. They moved away from the drum and trumpet political history of the early days to a wider analysis of African societies and critical accounts of the relations between African communities and the colonial powers. They also called for the use of oral traditions in order to move from a history of Africa based on the activities of Europeans in Africa and the passive reaction of African populations, to a history of the African populations. They began projects supported by African governments to study the history of African peoples with teams of scholars using the

insights of several disciplines.

In the 1970s, we can state that it is no longer necessary for African historians to assert the existence of kingdoms, empires, and large political organizations in Africa in the past. They know that Africans were not mere spectators in the march of progress. They see Africans as actors in the drama of human development from the beginnings of man on earth. But the African historian now faces new challenges and problems. The Hamitic hypothesis is under retreat but not completely dead and buried. More important, the African historian needs to move from the historiography of decolonization to historiography of self-understanding for self-government, nation-building, and originality rooted in the traditions of Africa. Now that we no longer have a colonial ruler to fight, in spite of the persistence of neocolonialism and colonial mentality, we need to move from a combative historiography directed to foreign consumers, to a historiography for self-education, self-reliance, national integration, and for the mutual understanding of communities.

-VI-

Our professional concerns are threefold. First, to attempt to make a contribution to the development of the theory and methodology of African oral tradition and historiography. Second, to use the best resources of scholarship to extend our knowledge of the history of the people of the Niger Delta and of the Rivers State in particular and Africa in general. Third, to apply the knowledge gained for the purposes of practical education at all levels. Both in formal classroom instruction and for public enlightenment.

The three interests are related one to the other, and feed each other in their results. Research informs the direction of teaching as well as the content of the training students receive.

African historians have not paid much attention to developing a theoretical base to their work or explicitly stating philosophical or ideological underpinnings of their work. They have mainly contested the claims by foreign detractors that there was no African history to be known, or that whatever African history there may be cannot be known because there was no written record of the African past. Accordingly, the concern has been with proving that there was a history, or that it was possible to write African history using oral traditions. That is, attention has been focused on the techniques for obtaining valid information from oral tradition. This task was first placed on a firm scholarly footing by Jan Vansina in his seminal work, **oral tradition: a study in historical methodology**, published in French in 1961, and in English in 1965. It is necessary to increase the depth of our understanding of the nature of oral tradition and our ability to extract information from it. It is also important that we teach respect for and understanding of oral tradition to all students of history. Our students should also be taught the practical means of collecting, evaluating and utilizing oral traditions in a systematic manner.

There are a few directions in which our study of oral tradition and historiography may be extended. We have begun to inquire objectively into the philosophical and theoretical grounds on which we accept and use oral traditions. This type of consideration strengthens our own understanding and faith in its validity as well as its contribution to the general body of historical thought and practice. There is little doubt that oral tradition provides one route through which African historians

can make an original contribution to international scholarship in the field of history.

We are concerned also that oral traditions be placed in a proper perspective in relation to other traditions of historiography. In Africa, the oral traditional mode of historical consciousness has been added to be Arabic or Islamic historiography from about the ninth century and since the sixteenth century by European or Western historiography. These new forms are backed by the prestige of dominating religions or technologies. They also have the advantage of being written traditions complete with the apparatus of absolute universal systems of chronology, the very areas in which African oral historiography is deficient. It is important for us to obtain a deep enough understanding of the ways in which each of these traditions of historiography have operate in Africa in competition with or in support of each other. We should note that, in African context, oral tradition has clear advantages over the others in the depth and scope of information it can provide concerning many aspects of the past.

In the last few years, African historians have begun to consider the possibilities of expanding their horizons and extending their analyses of the African past through the application of Marxist theories of history. It is our intention to expose our students to all possible new currents, including the use of statistical methods, so that they may be equipped to improve on our own performance in the next generation.

Concern with oral tradition takes us in the direction of inter-disciplinary research. This is in tune with the academic organization of the University of Port Harcourt in Schools rather than in Faculties with autonomous departments. In the

School of Humanities, oral traditions are studied as literature and as historical documents. Students specializing in history are required to take courses in Linguistics and Archaeology as well as in Philosophy and the Creative Arts. It is hoped that they will also be able to take courses offered in the School of Social Sciences. The object of the use of many disciplines in historical training is to add new dimensions and perspectives to the insights available to the historian with a restricted traditional training in written documentary history. It is not normally possible for a single person to become fully proficient in more than one discipline, but the historian in Africa needs to be able to communicate across disciplinary boundaries. He should be able to formulate historical questions in language that the practitioners of other disciplines can understand. He should also be able to understand and use the answers that his colleagues in neighbouring disciplines provide to his questions.

Research in the history of the Niger Delta has already benefitted a great deal from the insights of several disciplines. A survey of the oral traditions of the Ijò groups across the length and breadth of the Niger Delta suggested patterns of migration and settlement over a period of about a thousand years. The manner in which political, social, and cultural institutions developed over regions of the delta was also reconstructed. It then became necessary to test the conclusions derived from the oral traditions against the evidence of linguistics and archaeology. Much of the linguistic data has come from the research of scholars such as Joseph Greenberg, Hans Wolff, and Professors Kay Williamson of our School of Humanities, and an archaeological survey of the Niger Delta and the Rivers State is in progress.

The linguistic work summed up by Professor Kay Williamson has provided additional insights in several ways. First, the detailed classification of the languages of the area has clarified the relationships between peoples and communities that had emerged only dimly from the oral traditions. The classifications have also given confidence in the reconstructions of patterns and directions of migrations. Thus the classification of Udekama (Degema), Engenni and Epie-Atisa (the language of Yenagoa) as Delta Edoid, confirms some recent traditions linking them with Benin. That is, that they are likely to have come to their present homes in the distant past from some part of the Bendel State. Similarly, language classification relates the Abua, Odual, Ogbia, Kugbo, Bukuma, Abulome, Ogbogolo and Mini of the Rivers State to a single group (the Central Delta Group). This group is more distantly related to another group containing Khana, Gokana, and Eleme, and both are equally related to a third one containing Andoni or Obolo of the Rivers State along with the Efik-Ibibio of the Cross Rivers State. Eventually all these three groups are related to the Bantu of Central, Eastern and Southern Africa.

Secondly, linguistics has provided some indication of the antiquity of the relationships. By the methods of lexicostatistics it has been suggested that well over a thousand years separate the dialects of Ijo in the Western Delta and those in the Eastern Delta. Ijo is also over five thousand years distant from Igbo, Edo and Yoruba. This glottochronological distance underlines the clear distinction of Ijo from these other members of the South Central Niger Congo language family.

Thirdly, Kay Williamson has worked on the reconstruction of proto-Ijo. Such studies and the study of word borrowings

suggest lines of diffusion of ideas and goods, and therefore of the conditions and forms of contact. The reconstruction of proto-Ijò forms can also be used to study the culture of its speakers.

Archaeological excavations have been carried out at five sites in the Eastern Niger Delta at Onyoma, Ke, Ogoloma, Saikiriṣoṣu, and Okochiri. The sites were identified through the oral traditions, and the interpretation of the artifacts has proceeded with the assistance of oral traditions. Archaeologists have come from Ibadan and Nsukka to work with us on these excavations but we now have a resident archaeologist in the University of Port Harcourt. It is planned to do excavations at sites uncovered in the construction of the East-West Road at Wiiyaakara and Biara near Bori during the next dry season. Whenever possible, students will take part in these excavations as an integral part of their training.

We are in the process of compiling a book entitled **The Prehistory of the Niger Delta**, presenting the results of the work carried out so far. Among the many new things brought to light are collections of fine terra-cotta figurines of a type previously thought to exist only in a few places in Nigeria, especially in the region designated the Nok Culture Area of Central Nigeria. The Niger Delta terra-cotta are unique in being masks of a type now made only in wood. Large numbers of clay smoking pipes have also been discovered, the majority of them from Ogoloma. Evidence of metallurgical activities has also been found. Pottery and a surprisingly large variety of artifacts have been recovered that are being used to study the economic and cultural history of the Niger Delta. In the Eastern Delta, the preservation of so many materials has been made possible by the fact that they have lain within the interior of shell midden mounds.

Finally, the archaeological work has produced radio-carbon dates mainly from charcoal. These dates have confirmed the estimates from oral traditions and glottochronology that communities were settled in the Eastern Niger Delta as such places as Saikiripogu (Okpoma, Nembe), Ke in Kalabari, Ogoloms and Okochiri near Okrika from at least the ninth century, that is, over a thousand years ago. From the evidence of palynological studies by Dr. Margaret Sowunmi of the University of Ibadan, it has been suggested that settlement in the Eastern Delta may have taken place three thousand years ago. We may compare this with the glottochronological estimate of over five thousand years of separation time between Ijo and the major languages of the hinterland, and suggest that settlement in parts of the Niger Delta must be quite ancient, three of five thousand years at least.

This brief survey of our continuing academic work in the history of the Niger Delta and the Rivers State is given in partial defence of it against the criticism that such concentration of work in a single geographical area may be unhealthy. Indeed, in the early 1950s, some European Africanists had argued that African should not engage in studies of their own communities since they cannot do so with proper objectivity and distance. We note that in no part of the world do we find people leaving their history to be written for them by outsiders. In any case the foreigners have not shown themselves devoid of prejudices and ethnocentrism. The survey should have demonstrated that the work is a manysided one in which local knowledge of the language, customs and thought systems of the communities is important for the full understanding of oral evidence and the interpretation of artifacts and linguistic data.

What we are trying to do is not merely to pile fact on fact, or to create a romantic image of past societies. Rather, we hope to achieve a rich reconstruction of the past with as much of its contradictions and colour as the data will permit. Finally, we wish to place the local history in the wider context of the history of Nigeria, of African, and eventually of the world.

It is only such study in depth that can produce good material for popularization for use in schools and for public adult education. The process of the collection of oral tradition often becomes an exercise in public relations. But we have also deliberately made our archaeological work open to public participation. Pre-excavation sessions of public discussion, and rituals, have been common. Local people take part in excavations; and three out of the five excavations have been followed by public lectures, and exhibitions of the artifacts. The idea has been to involve the public in the experience of their history, and to educate them to report the discovery of sites and artifacts from farms, the digging of building foundations, wells, and other constructions.

The more fundamental effort of introduction of the data into the educational system has been attempted in the writing of simple texts. Biographies in the style of stories have been written for primary and secondary school readers. Collaboration with colleagues in education and linguistics has produced the series of elementary readers in the languages of the Rivers State. We hope that the civilian government of the Rivers State will continue to support this project as well as the project to write a history of the communities of the state for use in the schools.

Whatever we do, we must continue to ask ourselves: Are historical studies relevant for modern Nigerian society? We know that traditional communities all over the country had, and still have, great regard for historical knowledge. They valued the keen sight that historical knowledge gives. The Ikwerre likened it to the watchful patience of the python. Our people stress the need to keep our eyes (as well as our ears) close to the earth. In the wrestling arena, the drums say (in Nembe):

Tọrụmá kírímá kírímá
Eyes to the ground

Tọrụmá kírímá kírímá.
Eyes to the ground.

Similarly, a man walking along a path needs to keep his eyes to the ground; to watch his step. Our people believed that history provides the type of knowledge that guides our step, that gives us the patience and the alertness derived from experience to deal with the problems of today. It is by no means obvious that our modern Nigerian society and its leaders realize the need for historical perspective and consciousness. Our recent history is all too full of hasty condemnation of our predecessors, and those who prepared the ground for us to do what we are able to do. Every new regime has spent time and energy to destroy the reputation of its predecessors. We always need to critically assess the record of achievement of our predecessors in order that we can improve on it. However, we appear determined to have no ancestors, no heroes, and no standards and mileposts from the past to guide our steps. We are unwilling to learn from the past. Nigeria may not have physically eliminated as many Heads of State as some of her neighbours, but it has not been from lack of trying. The last military regime, of course, began to change towards the end of its period in office by declaring national heroes and placing their pictures on our paper money. It thus set a precedent for

an attitude favourable to using the past creatively in the service of the present.

Ladies and gentlemen, the School of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt, intends to continue the rigorous study of history in order to provide its students with the vision of the python and an understanding of their identity and place in the sun.

Thank you.

SELECT REFERENCE LIST

- Ajayi, J. F. A. and E. J. Alagoa: "Black Africa: The Historians' Perspective." *Daedalus*, 103 No 2 (1974), 125-134.
- Alagoa, E. J.: Oral Tradition among the Ijo of the Niger Delta." *Journal of African History*, 7, No.3 (1966), 405-419.
- Alagoa, E. J.: *Jaja of Opobo, the slave who became a king*. Ibadan: Longmans, 1970.
- Alagoa, E. J.: *A Chronicle of Grand Bonny*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1972.
- Alagoa, E. J.: *A History of the Niger Delta: an Historical Interpretation of Ijo Oral Tradition*. Ibadan: IUP, 1972.
- Alagoa, E. J.: Oral Tradition and Archaeology: the case of Onyoma." *Oduma*, 1, No.1. (Oct. 1973), 10-12.
- Alagoa, E. J.: "Terra-Cotta from the Niger Delta." *Black Orpheus*, 3, Nos. 2 and 3 (1974/75), 29-39.
- Alagoa, E. J.: *King Boy of Brass*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975.
- Alagoa, E. J.: "The interdisciplinary approach to African History in Nigeria." *Presence Africaine*, No. 94 (1975), 171-183.
- Alagoa, E. J.: "Archaeological Survey of the Rivers State." (*Rivers Research Scheme*). *Rivers Research Scheme. First Interim Report*. Ibadan: Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan (1975), 1-20.
- Anozie, F. N.: "Archaeological Research in the Rivers State." *Oduma*, 1, No.1 (Oct. 1973), 4-9.
- Anozie, F.N. "Onyoma and Ke: a Preliminary Report on Archaeological Excavations in the Niger Delta." *West African Journal of Archaeology*, 6 (1976), 89-99.
- Collingwood, R. G.: *The Idea of History*. New York: oxford University Press, 1956.
- Descartes, Rene: *Discourse on Method*.

- Goldstein, Leon J.: "History and the Primacy of knowing." *History and Theory*, Beiheft 16: The Constitution of the Historical Past (1977), 29-52.
- Hegel, George Wilhelm Friedrich: *The Philosophy of History*. New York: Dover Publications, 1956.
- Krausz, Michael: *Critical Essays on the Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*. London and New York: OUP, 1972. (Review by William Dray, *History and Theory*, XIII, No. 3 (1974), 291-305.)
- Nowell-Smith, P. H.: "The Constructionist Theory of History." *History and Theory*, Beiheft 16 (1977), 1-28.
- Passmore, John: "The Poverty of Historicism Revisited." *History and Theory*, Beiheft 14: Essays on Historicism (1975), 30-47.
- Sanders, Edith R.: "The Hamitic Hypothesis: Its origin and functions in time perspective." *Journal of African History*, 10, No.4 (1969), 521), 521-532.
- Seligman, C. G.: *Races of Africa*.
- Vansina, Jan: *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. (Translated from the French by H.M. Wright). Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1965.
- White, Hayden V.: "Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination." *History and Theory*, Beiheft 14 (1975), 48-67.
- Walsh, W. H.: "Truth and Fact in History Reconsidered." *History and Theory*, Beiheft 16 (1977), 53-71.
- Williamson, Kay: "The Rivers Readers Project in Nigeria." *Mother Tongue Education" The West African Experience*. Ed. Ayo Bamgbose. Paris: UNESCO Press, 1976, 135-153.
- Williamson, Kay: *A Grammar of the Kolokuma Dialect of Ijo*. Ibadan: OUP, 1965.

