

“LEADERS IN HISTORY”

CHAIRMAN’S ADDRESS

**AT THE NATIONAL HISTORY QUIZ COMPETITION
MAIN AUDITORIUM, DANSOL HIGH SCHOOL, 13/15, ACME CRESCENT,
AGIDINGBI, IKEJA, LAGOS STATE**

SATURDAY, 9 FEBRUARY 2013

My Lords Spiritual and Temporal, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, Fellow Teachers and Students of History

First, let us give thanks to God Almighty for making this event a reality and ensuring the safe arrival of everyone. Next, I appreciate everyone, especially student representatives of various secondary schools and their teachers, for sparing the time to attend this important event. Permit me to express special gratitude to the organizers of this competition for the honour of chairing the occasion and delivering this address. I am here today in a dual capacity as Professor of History and Convener of the Network of Nigerian Historians, a body that shares the aspirations of Mr. James Onimisi and his team.

The National History Competition, which will commence shortly, has a telling theme: “Leaders in History.” It is difficult to imagine a more apt theme considering the leadership challenge besetting our nation and the African continent. More than ever before, informed Nigerians have been lamenting the neglect of History as a subject in the senior secondary school curriculum and the relegation of history from policy formulation and implementation in the country. Notable Nigerians, not least the doyen of African History, Professor Emeritus J.F. Ade Ajayi, have argued convincingly that most of the crises that confront and hobble the Nigerian State are traceable to the lack of a sense of history. As we speak, our leaders are focused on marking the centenary of the formal “creation” of the Nigerian State as we know it. But it remains to be seen what lessons they have learnt from our national stumbles or even what role

professional historians have to play in what should ordinarily be an occasion for sober soul-searching. But so far, it is the usual Nigerian preoccupation with hype and sound without substance. The Centenary jamboree simply provides people in power another platform for the endless grandstanding, posturing and (re)positioning in the gladiatorial schemings for power and profit.

Our leaders in particular never learn from their own mistakes and those made by their forebears, and they do not bother to learn from the positive examples from the past, including lessons from other lands. Obviously, they never bother to read history, both national and comparative, and the nation is the worse for it. Nobody can be a serious student of history – or, an outstanding leader for that matter - without being an avid reader of books on history and related subjects, such as literature and geography. Readers, they say, are leaders, and vice versa. This is what gives historians the breadth and depth of knowledge of people, places and events that non-historians marvel at.

To be sure, history deals with societal developments in chronological sequence but historians do not just cram dates for their sake and do not necessarily regard all events as important or equally important, or even worthy of study. Historians are gifted writers too but that stems from taking notes during lectures and writing essays in general. That is why it is lamentable that the quality of writing in schools has dropped, a result of the increasing reliance on multiple choice questions (MCQ) to test knowledge in the humanities.

Given the foregoing, it is a delight to know that the likes of Mr. James Onimisi have sustained a passion for the discipline of History to the extent of organizing this national quiz to engender interest in the subject. This is not about bread and butter; it is a patriotic service that deserves encouragement considering the calamity that a deliberate ignorance of history represents. The goal of the competition is most striking: "Know Your History." Failure to know your history makes you a slave to past mistakes, limits your horizon, robs you of your memory and identity, leaves you open to manipulation by others, who can distort your history and identity as a people or individuals, and reduces you to copycats of other peoples' cultures and traditions, which are the product of their history.

The Network of Nigerian Historians (NNH) is willing to collaborate with organizations such as this to re-awaken interest in history. We are committed to getting the subject restored to the upper secondary school syllabus and supportive of its popularization within the larger community. No nation can develop or assert itself without its citizens' grounding in their history and culture. This is why today's event resonates with the aim of the NNH to partner governments to restore history to the curriculum, develop books for use at the senior primary and secondary school levels, develop capacity for effective teaching and learning, and inject history into the process of planning, policy making and implementation, the lack of which has been a major factor in our nation's endless gyrations without progress.

I call on all well meaning Nigerians to join us at the NNH to reposition history in our school curriculum and national life. Today's event is an important step in the right direction and one hopes that the young minds being nurtured through such platforms would end up with the appropriate sense of history in preparation to occupy critical decision-making positions in national life. Then, as we hope, they will apply history to the process of re-shaping our national life for the better. At that point, they will not merely have written history but succeeded in making it.

On behalf of the Organizers of this Quiz Competition, I formally declare this event open. I look forward to a session of enthralling engagement with History.

Thank you for listening. God bless.

Professor Ayodeji Olukoju

Fellow, Nigerian Academy of Letters

Vice-Chancellor, Caleb University, Imota, Lagos State &

Convener, Network of Nigerian Historians

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