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## The Historian and the Past in the Present Age: Omolewa and Adesina's Inaugural Lectures in Perspective

### About the Author(s)

Ikeoluwapo B. Baruwa is an exemplary scholar whose academic journey and contributions have significantly impacted the fields of education, history, and philosophy. A PhD candidate at Queen's University, Canada, he holds advanced degrees from the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and serves as the managing editor of *Research in a Nutshell (RiaN)* in the faculty of education at Queen's. Ikeoluwapo's research interests, encompassing African philosophy, relational pedagogy, history of education, higher education, and virtue epistemology, Black studies, have led to numerous publications in international journals, reflecting his dedication to advancing knowledge and education. His memberships in numerous prestigious educational societies and receipt of several academic awards, including the Walter F. Light Graduate Fellowship Award, underscore his influence and commitment to academic excellence.

### Keywords

History, History of Education, Inaugural Lectures, Michael Omolewa, Olutayo Adesina, Rear View Mirror

### Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgements I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Prof. Sarumi Abideen Abidoye for granting me the privilege to review the inaugural lectures of Adesina and Omolewa during my time at the University of Ibadan. This review was a crucial assignment that I needed to complete as a graduate student in Prof. Abidoye's course. Additionally, I am thankful to my academic mentor, Dr. Chris Omoregie, for providing valuable guidance and support as I delved into the works of esteemed professors like Omolewa and Adesina. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers who dedicated their time to evaluate my work. Their insightful feedback, received after I drafted the review in 2019, allowed me to refine and improve my work for greater clarity and precision.



## **The Historian and the Past in the Present Age: Omolewa and Adesina's Inaugural Lectures in Perspective**

Ikeoluwapo Baruwa, *Queen's University*

### **Abstract**

In their inaugural lectures, Omolewa and Adesina emphasized the importance of history in studying the changes that have occurred over the years across all aspects of humanity, particularly in education. This paper aims to examine the contributions of Omolewa and Adesina, delving into their arguments and insights. While this paper may adopt a critical approach, it also acknowledges the value of their work. It presents a dissenting view from Omolewa's perspective on historical education, particularly regarding his analogy of history as a rearview mirror and the objectivity of historians. The paper contends that historians must be aware of historical texts' inherent limitations, biases, strengths, and weaknesses and should employ rigorous validation methods, including internal and external criticism, in evaluating sources.

*Keywords:* History, History of Education, Inaugural Lectures, Michael Omolewa, Olutayo Adesina, Rear View Mirror

### **Introduction**

The concept of causation has long been a perennial interest for philosophers, prompting a deeper exploration of its relevance to various human topics. Causation delves into the relationship between cause and effect to comprehend and elucidate the paradox of appearance and reality. It seeks to fathom why things manifest in their particular manner, understand the processes governing change, and potentially intervene in the natural course of events. As contemporary thinkers and actors, it is inevitable that we appreciate the parallels between causation and understanding our history. It prompts us to ponder whether there can be a form devoid of forms or a discipline or entities devoid of an origin.

Adult education, as a discipline, has its distinct origin, just as history as an academic discipline does. History allows us to understand the causes of events that have unfolded over the

years and whether they have had positive or negative consequences. It provides us with insights to help shape the future. Philosophers may debate the concept of causation, but historiography, which encompasses the history, philosophy, and methodology of history, is a subject-specific to historians. Both philosophy and history are foundational fields of study, so I am particularly interested in the inaugural lectures of Professor Emeritus Omolewa (of Adult Education, University of Ibadan) and Professor Adesina (of History, University of Ibadan).

In their inaugural lectures, titled *Education through the Rear-View Mirror* (Omolewa, 1987) and *The Future of the Past* (Adesina, 2012), Omolewa and Adesina emphasize the significance of history as a field that examines societal changes across various spheres of humanity. As an academic discipline, history encompasses many aspects of human society, including education, politics, economy, science, technology, culture, intellect, military affairs, religion, and medicine. The scholarly contributions of Omolewa in Adult Education and Adesina in History are invaluable and should not be underestimated due to their profound impact on knowledge.

This article aims to explore the inaugural lectures, *Education through the Rear-View Mirror* by Emeritus Professor Michael Omolewa (Department of Adult Education, University of Ibadan) in 1987, and *The Future of the Past* by Professor Olutayo Charles Adesina (Department of History, University of Ibadan) in 2012. The goal is to comprehend their arguments and contributions to the field of knowledge and to present their work engagingly to those interested in the subject. While this article may critically evaluate their work, it also aims to recognize its value simultaneously.

### **Education through the Rear-view Mirror**

Omolewa introduced the title, *Education through the Rear-view Mirror*, to promote historical learning, teaching, and education research. He found inspiration in the enduring criticism that history as a discipline has faced over the years. He highlighted the perspectives of notable figures, such as Napoleon, Carlyle, Oscar Wilde, Henry Ford, Matthew Arnold, Nietzsche, and Voltaire, who viewed history as a collection of falsehoods, trivial tales, and mere gossip. He also echoed the sentiments of Henry Carr, the first African Inspector of Education. He emphasized historians' limitations in predicting the future but acknowledged their unique ability to shape the past. He emphasized the significance of historical studies by pointing out their

prominent presence in universities and schools and recognizing distinguished historians like Prof. J. F. Ade Ajayi with a National Merit Award in 1986.

Omolewa further emphasized the significance of historical research, expressing concern that the rear-view mirror approach has yet to be fully explored. He highlighted the oversight in acknowledging traditional rulers who could send their children to colonial schools. He cautioned about the importance of utilizing primary sources to gather, analyze, and discuss findings in historical and educational research (Ayandele, 1974). There is only research or a problem with a cause or origin, so Omolewa emphasized the importance of historical studies and education today. Verner (1964), an early supporter of historical research in adult education, noted that:

Adult education here is so preoccupied with day-to-day tasks that it needs to establish sufficient identification with its past. Thus, it has no affection for the literature it has produced.

According to Verner, the origin of adult education as a discipline is a matter of debate. Nevertheless, this paper examines the numerous events that have shaped the discipline. It is commonly believed that the Bishop Grundtvig movement marked the beginnings of organized adult education to educate the peasants and common people of that era. This movement evolved into the Danish Folk High School, which still exists today. However, this paper argues that the 18th and 19th centuries also saw significant developments in adult education before the emergence of the Grundtvig movement. For example, Griffith Jones, a minister of the Church of England and member of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, established schools in Wales in 1731 to teach the Welsh people to read in their language. By Jones's death in 1761, over 200,000 Welsh individuals learned to read in these schools (Davies, 2002). Additionally, while it is commonly believed that Eduard Lindeman's book, *The Meaning of Adult Education*, published in 1926 (Lindeman, 1961), marked the beginning of adult education as a discipline, this paper argues that J. H. Hudson had recognized adult education as a distinct field in 1851 in his book, *The History of Adult Education*. It became a fully developed discipline in the 20th century.

In educational research, the introductory section of most theses and papers underscores the significance of historical context in education. While some argue that this is not inherently

technical or professional, it is undeniably valuable for every research endeavor to trace the origins of the variables, concepts, or issues under study. This resonates with the definition provided by the International Development Research Council of Canada, which emphasizes the importance of historical, philosophical, and empirical methods in all research endeavors:

Educational research is any activity that leads to a better understanding of education problems and produces findings relevant to policy formulation and program planning. Research includes any activity involving information gathering and analysis, from the simplest to the most sophisticated operation (Omolewa, p. 8).

The empirical approach has often been considered the most critical method in the present age. However, Omolewa identified a gap and argued that just as a driver relies on the rear-view mirror for practical driving, an educational manager would benefit from a similar tool. While the historical method is undeniably essential in education and adult education research, the question remains: To what extent can the rear-view mirror capture distant objects, and can we truly compare Omolewa's rear-view mirror model to the value of history in its relation to reality?

### **Education through the Rear-view Mirror?**

Omolewa (1987), in his lecture, defined the term *rear-view mirror* as "the instrument that provides the driver with the view at the back of the motor vehicle in the course of driving" (p. 1). According to Omolewa and other experts in the field, the study of history reveals that the past is a continuous process, shaping the present and influencing the future. This understanding requires exploring and debating how the defined historical past may relate to the present and future. Comparing the importance of history to that of a rear-view mirror may need to be more accurate, as historical studies go beyond merely observing past events, unlike the limited view provided by a rear-view mirror. History as a discipline and tool delves deeper, offering a detailed account of the past and taking researchers beyond their comfort zones. The rigorous process of historical study extends far beyond observing what is happening in the immediate past, resembling the limitation of relying solely on a car's rear-view mirror.

Furthermore, history presents facts logically rather than uncritically accepting information. Omolewa (1987) referenced Acton, who views history as based on documents and

sources, not emotions or assumptions. For example, Omolewa debunked the common belief that Dr. Nnamdi Azikwe was the first Igbo graduate, revealing that Alvan Ikoku earned his BA from the University of London in 1929 through a distance learning program. Omolewa also highlighted that the first four Nigerian graduates of the University of London external degree programs, namely Emmanuel O. Ajayi (BA, 1927), Alvan Ikoku (BA, 1929), S. A. Banjo, and Josiah S. Ogunlesi (BA, 1933), all attained their degrees through distance education and were teachers (Omolewa, 1987).

In light of these considerations, this paper argues that history goes beyond being just an object or a rear-view mirror characterized by Omolewa. While his arguments supporting the rear-view mirror model are acknowledged, this paper deviates semantically from the perspective that Omolewa appears to have overlooked. As an academic discipline, history encompasses more than just narratives; it offers a comprehensive understanding of past events that shape those involved's present and future endeavors. It is subject to ongoing internal and external scrutiny and a critique of research findings, similar to the points articulated by Omolewa in his lecture.

### **Misconceptions and Attacks on History as a Discipline**

Omolewa (1987) critiqued the uncritical views and relentless attacks on the discipline of history, drawing a parallel with the message of St. Paul to the nations. He quoted Philipians 3:13, “this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before.”

Omolewa believed that the evangelist St. Paul must have dismissed the idea of dwelling on past events, much like looking in a rear-view mirror, when he told his audience that his focus was on what lies ahead, not behind. However, this paper respectfully disagrees with Omolewa's interpretation. It argues that St. Paul did not intend for his words to be taken in a literal sense. In the same chapter, St. Paul intended for believers to abandon their old ways and embrace the ways of Christ. He exhorted Christians not to engage in the negative behaviors they practiced before knowing Christ and instead strive towards the virtuous actions expected of those reborn in Christ. St. Paul's mention of his past experiences served as a case study to advise others, indicating that he did not advocate forgetting one's past. However, he emphasized the importance of avoiding behaviors that could hinder spiritual growth in Christ. To reinforce this perspective,

St. Paul concluded the chapter by conveying the idea that as believers, our primary focus should be on our spiritual identity and the transformative power of Christ:

For our conversation is in heaven (in Christ), from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body according to the working whereby he can even subdue all things to himself (King James Bible, 2007).

Although it is acknowledged that the discipline faces criticism and misunderstandings, this paper advocates for incorporating semantic analysis in articulating and presenting factual information.

On the debate around the nomenclature of history, Adesina highlights how the name "history" has sparked controversies among experts in the field. While many students prefer alternative names such as international studies, strategic studies, or developmental studies, others have called for a complete overhaul of the department. Some even argue that disciplines like history and humanities are not essential for human survival (Adesina, 2006). In response, Adesina emphasized that despite external pressures, scholars in the field have upheld the longstanding intellectual traditions of historical studies. Adesina also pointed out that the issue of nomenclature has hindered the discipline from achieving its objectives. However, the question arises: if the discipline remains focused amidst these pressures, why does attaining its objectives become an issue? This perspective may extend beyond the scope of this paper's discussion.

Adesina also asserted the influence of surrealist historiography and African history. He suggested that numerous films, stage performances, and plays created by Africans and non-Africans significantly shape the narrative structure of historiography. This challenges traditional historical conceptions by incorporating entertainment and adventure to engage the audience. In the inaugural lecture, Femi Osofisan, a prominent playwright referenced by Adesina (2006), expressed a similar sentiment, stating:

... I am not saying we should renounce the past – anyone familiar with my works knows already how heavily dependent they are on ancient rituals and folklore – but that we take from the past only those aspects we are sure will



help us make fuller sense of our present, and help us advance into the future  
(The Sun, December 3, 2011, p.28).

It is often claimed that some people live in oblivion, but they adapt to changing times and events. As Omolewa wisely pointed out, this adaptability should be cautiously exercised.

Another common misconception is the notion of history repeating itself. Adesina argues that this statement needs to be revised because what is perceived as historic recurrences may not align with expert opinions. Adesina acknowledges that historical events can sometimes evoke a sense of resonance or *déjà vu* but asserts that this can lead to misleading conclusions. Historians argue that history cannot repeat itself, as it is impossible to experience the exact replication of events, individuals, or circumstances. History can be regarded as a thinking entity rather than a living one, constantly subject to change and never repeating itself similarly.

It is commonly misunderstood that reflecting on and evaluating historical events could be harmful, mainly when not handled with care. For example, Adesina argues that some individuals may vividly recall past experiences without understanding their relevance to their present or future. This lack of awareness is evident in people who dismiss the past, regret it, or attribute it to divine will without recognizing its impact on their present and future.

This paper contends that Adesina overlooks the layman and professional perspectives on how individuals perceive “the past.” It is not that these individuals are entirely wrong – although their assertions may be disputed – but rather that they lack a nuanced understanding of the essence of history. Consequently, experts in the field should ensure that the meaning and scope of history are expounded upon in a way that goes beyond mere layperson or ordinary interpretations.

### **The Why of Doing History**

It is quite perplexing to encounter the prioritization of social studies over history in the school curriculum. This aligns with the sentiments that resulted in history being excluded from the curriculum. Omolewa aptly expressed similar concerns, lamenting the illogical practice of replacing history with another subject in the Nigerian school curriculum. Omolewa emphasized the unique importance of social studies and history, asserting that each serves distinct purposes and deserves a place in the curriculum.

The teaching of history, particularly at junior levels, may have needed to be approached appropriately by the methodology or the teachers. History, in its strict sense, involves dates and times, which may not capture the interest of some students. However, Omolewa suggests that the teaching approach to history can be improved if it fosters the students' understanding, experience, and appreciation of the human subjects involved. Effective teaching of history necessitates preparedness on the part of the teacher and the use of a variety of methods, not just relying on the popular lecture method. Many traditional history teachers tend to dull the content, so historians and educators must ensure critical analysis in seeking the truth. Only by appropriately doing history can the interest of those not inclined to learn in an uncertain age be stimulated. The essence of history as an academic discipline is to enrich our understanding and vision of our society and hone our analytical skills (Baruwa, 2023). The nature of history at the secondary level led to its removal, although it has been reinstated recently. Therefore, if this is not maintained and sustained, it might prompt questioning regarding the relevance of history to humanity.

History is critical in dispelling misconceptions and unwarranted beliefs that people may have accepted without questioning their validity. Through a retrospective approach, Omolewa sheds light on the origin of adult education, highlights the first Igbo graduate, Alvan Ikoku, and explores the connections between the West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) and the Joint Admission Matriculation Board (JAMB). Additionally, Omolewa delves into the relationship between formal and non-formal education, emphasizing that adult education is a lifelong process. The examination malpractice, unified examination body, mass education by the British colonial government, and history curriculum development are also traced to their origins. Importantly, Omolewa's work reveals Nigeria's Indigenous adult education, contrary to the belief of some Western scholars who claimed that such education did not exist before colonialism. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating History in schools and promoting adult education as an essential practice.

Carr's argument that historians cannot predict the future is countered by Adesina, who suggests that history is the progenitor of the future, with the future comfortably residing in its womb. In other words, history extends beyond the past and present. Therefore, it is imperative for present and future history educators and scholars to critically examine and re-examine issues

pertinent to the advancement of society. Moreover, history should strive to emancipate humanity from ignorance and injustice, freeing individuals from their state of unknown. Adesina concluded by emphasizing the necessity for a comprehensive reconsideration of historical knowledge, scholarship, and practice. Omolewa echoed this sentiment by advocating for increased investment in research in educational history within universities.

### **Conclusion**

Human beings and events invariably connect their past with the present to envision the future. However, if someone exists without acknowledging their past, they could be considered a marginal individual – torn between two choices, unable to decide whether to move forward or look back. As Otite (1992) once expressed, man (sic) is not only a bearer of culture but also a creator, shaping both spiritual and material realms. Therefore, she contains his past and links his present with the future. Consequently, history as one of the undervalued disciplines must be appreciated because of its numerous potentialities.

A variety of local and global factors influence the discipline of history. This paper aligns with the perspectives of Omolewa and Adesina and emphasizes the need for an enhanced approach to teaching history, contrary to common misconceptions about the field. Building on the significant contributions of Omolewa and Adesina, it is evident that history is a dynamic study that encompasses all aspects of humanity. Non-specialists must recognize that history extends beyond generalizations about periods, individuals, and events. Historians are attentive to changes, focusing on specific and intricate developments that form the basis of these generalizations, and at times, they may challenge or dismiss them. Furthermore, historians specialize in specific facets of history to critically engage with its dynamism. For instance, Omolewa specializes in educational history, while Adesina focuses on economic history.

History cannot repeat itself because it is a conceptual entity, not a living being. History is about change, and nothing has ever been permanently fixed. While there are instances of historical recurrence, they do not define the entirety of history. This is akin to the perspective of non-historians who often idealize the past and nostalgically refer to the good old days, believing that things were better than they are in the present, or those who view history as a linear progression of improvement. It is essential to recognize that historians consider historical

processes to involve intricate relationships between interconnected factors and, therefore, cannot be categorized as progress or regress.

This paper differs from Omolewa because it equates historical education to a rear-view mirror. It posits that history encompasses a detailed account of past events, unlike the simplistic association with a rear-view mirror. While historians traditionally prioritize primary sources over secondary sources, this paper contends that Adesina and Omolewa should have acknowledged the significance of secondary sources in the hands of an unbiased historian, especially in scenarios where access to primary sources is limited.

Historians employ footnotes and bibliographies to demonstrate the thoroughness and precision of their work, highlighting originality, methodology, and conclusions. It is important to note that historians approach history differently, recognizing that the practice of doing history must evolve alongside societal changes. Consequently, historians acknowledge the distinction between facts and interpretations within their specific domains and across different eras.

Close examination of Omolewa and Adesina's inaugural lectures, *Education through the Rear-View Mirror* and *The Future of the Past*, reveals that historians cannot attain complete objectivity. Nonetheless, they must recognize texts' flaws, limitations, biases, strengths, and weaknesses and accept or challenge sources based on internal and external validation methods.

### **Acknowledgments**

I am writing to express my gratitude to Professor Sarumi Abideen Abidoeye for granting me the privilege to review the inaugural lectures of Adesina and Omolewa during my time at the University of Ibadan. This review was a crucial assignment I needed to complete as a graduate student in Prof. Abidoeye's course. Additionally, I am thankful to my academic mentor, Dr. Chris Omoregie, for providing valuable guidance and support as I delved into the works of esteemed professors like Omolewa and Adesina. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers who dedicated their time to evaluate my work. Their insightful feedback, received after I drafted the review in 2019, allowed me to refine and improve my work for greater clarity and precision.

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