

SAYING NO TO MEDIOCRITY (A POLEMIC?)

For my Christmas and New Year break, I did something I usually do for fun, I read. For relaxation, I read “Robinson Crusoe” by Daniel Defoe, an extremely symbolic and electric book which held my attention from the beginning to the end irrespective of its strongly religious undertone. I then followed this up with “Marx” by David McLellan, a small but extremely concise book introducing the reader to both Karl Marx, his works and Marxism. These books go a long way in improving ones written and spoken English, even a bit of linguistic history can be extrapolated from Defoe's book, examples of editing and typographical perfection like most Western books. I was just beginning to settle into Jean Jacques Rousseau's “Du Contrat Social”, or “Social Contract Theory” by the end of the holiday season when I remembered that I had a term paper to write.

Since the term paper was based on topics from Egyptian and Sudanese 19th Century History, I gathered my material which included “Egypt and Her Neighbours, A General Survey” (e.d by M.M. Ogbeide). This book luckily for me happened to be the only indigenous Nigerian reference I was to have. During the process of studying, my material, I realized that a lot was strange, if not wrong with the book. To start with, I thought it was a bit weird for the authors of chapters in a book to be hyped at the beginning of a book; albeit though, this is not overly unusual in books, besides, often the reader does want to know about the author. However, this is not my reason for abandoning my important term paper to write an essay, no! I am angry with the quality of writings we have in Nigeria; I am especially angry that such abysmal writings come out from tertiary institutions.

The title of P.H.D., to my, mind should connote the peak of an academic career, it should depict astute professionalism, which indeed are realities a lot of people embody in the University of Lagos, yet the amount of junk that comes out of the same University and its relatively huge of amount of P.H.D. holders is just unbearable. Its alright to my mind when a published work is jejune, but when its wriggled with typographical errors, and anachronisms; now that it sacrilege especially in the Department of History; that posterity looks upon for passed down information and knowledge. I know that these words are seemingly rather harsh, but do pardon me, and examine my defense.

Let us begin thus, for the Historian, the greatest crime one can commit in the line of duty is “plagiarism”, the Historian can end up in jail for this; the next thing to my mind is “anachronism” since people tend to associate the modern Historian with their precision with dates. The line “...by **1789**, Khedive declared that he would not be able to pay back his loans and abdicated” (ibid. pg. 94), my gosh! A Khedive in Egypt, in the year of the French Revolution! How ludicrous; Khedive Ismail certainly did not abdicate until 1879 after being served a firman secured from the Ottoman Porte by the European powers; I am also certain Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol, 6 does not say otherwise.

Yet thats not all, in the same book, I observed after reading just two Chapters cases of misinformation and the misappropriate use of wording. For the former please refer to pg 94 again, where the author comfortably writes of “nationalist led by Pasha Urabi!! General

Ahmad Urabi, Sergeant Ahmad Arabi, but Pasha?; Colonel Ahmad Urabi (1839-1911) who led the 1881/1882 revolt was fighting against the Turco-circassian aristocracy, and Pasha is a Turkish title. How fair is it then that an article written by an African refers to Urabi, a fellahin, making the revolutionary a Pasha, yes Urabi was made Minister of War (Pasha in Turkish) and even led the nationalist in 1881/1882, but for barely a year before he was sentenced to death (later revoked and changed to exile in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka). But then what about the inappropriate use of wording, what can any English speaking writer mean when he writes that a certain fellow “deserves the acronym of Statesman” (M.M Ogeidi, op. Cit. pg 86). Acronym! the one Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines as “a word formed from the first letters of a group of words”. Where is the first letter? is it the “S”, “State” or “Man”. In this case, I humbly recommend that the Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) publish a new recommended list of Dictionaries.

You probably think that’s all, but no, there is still some icing on the cake, typographical errors (hopefully not spelling errors). Welcome page 95 of our book if you ever handle a copy, and right there at the beginning of the page; “The revolt of Urab”., oops, the “I” must have escaped that evil finger on the keyboard or typewriter! But what is the job of the Editor? to catch such escaped letters before the work is “PUBLISHED”, not even necessarily the Editor whose name is on the book, but before a book is published should it not be thoroughly edited? Certainly not by one person.

As to our book “Egypt and her neighbours, a general survey” edited by M.M Ogbeidi which I have used as a case study, I desperately hope a new less hastily edited, maybe even better researched edition is on its way. I really don't think it is not enough to hide under the veil of human fallibility, for there lies the green eyed monster called “MEDIOCRITY”. Books, i.e. published works should/would be used as a point of reference by posterity and do not easily die away, thus it is important to be a good reference. I know this books might be right about adequate for passing exams in Nigerian Universities, but they are certainly not very good and in one word, mediocre. This polemic if I may be permitted to call it so, is certainly not written out of any malign intentions, it is written to be an intellectual spur, hopefully for the massive number of intelligentsia that we have in Nigeria, UNILAG and the Department of History as a microcosm. Editors and Authors alike, please, perfection is not too much to ask, say no to mediocrity.

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REFERENCES: “EGYPT AND HER NEIGHBOURS: A General Survey”, edited by Michael M. Ogbeidi, Publishers Express, www.publishersexpress.com, Printed by Foresight press, Lagos, Nigeria 2005. ISBN 978-37385-8-5. Encyclopedia Britannica, 2000, CD edition. Microsoft Encarta dictionary. Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary. ***Essay completed on the 8th January, 2006. Written by T.O.A