

History, Why is it written and who writes it?

Dr. Benkheira Nadjib*, The University of Sharjah (Sharjah)

Nadjibhistory28@yahoo.fr

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Abstract: History, why do we write it and who writes it? It has become clear in contemporary culture that caring for the past is not like remembering events that have passed and gone, and there is no census of names that have gone and gone, and not an intellectual luxury used by pastors who look at the present with a dark, look ..

In an era in which the curricula were numerous, the visions varied, and the references differed in it There must be a clear scientific position based on firm principles that highlight the right approach in writing history, and the characteristics of who writes it, because in the absence of the curriculum the energies are scattered, efforts fragment, and intolerance intensifies Effectiveness diminishes, and bidding weakens. And the contemporary generation possesses the tools of research, the methods of consideration, the mechanisms of investigation, and the means of communication, which makes it able to re-read its history away from the condescending view that characterized the tendency of orientalists who wrote dark papers about the history of the Arabs and their prosperous Islamic civilization ...

This article highlights these meanings in the following axes:

1- Historical knowledge: laying the foundations. 2- Why do we record history? 3- Who writes history?

Key words: historical knowledge, history writing, awareness of history, characteristics of the historian, -Islamic civilization.

*- *Corresponding author*

الملخص:

التاريخ لماذا نكتبه ومن يكتبه ؟ لقد بات واضحاً في الثقافة المعاصرة أن الاهتمام بالماضي ليس من قبيل استذكار أحداث مضت و انقضت، ولا إحصاء لأسماء ذهببت واندثرت، وليس ترفاً فكرياً يشتغل به الماضيون الذين ينظرون إلى الحاضر نظرة قاتمة سوداوية معتمة ..

وفي عصر تعددت فيه المناهج ، وتنوعت فيه الرؤى ، واختلفت فيه المرجعيات ... لا بد من موقف علمي واضح ينبني على ثوابت راسخة تُبرز المنهج القويم في كتابة التاريخ ، ومواصفات من يكتبه ، لأنه في غياب المنهج تتبعثر الطاقات ، وتتفتت الجهود ، ويشتد التعصب ، وتتضاءل الفاعلية ، ويضعف العطاء . و الجيل المعاصر يملك من أدوات البحث ، وطرائق النظر ، وآليات التحقيق ، ووسائل التواصل ما يجعله يستطيع أن يعيد قراءة تاريخه بعيداً عن النظرة الاستعلائية التي طبعت تناول المستشرقين المغرضين الذين سطوروا صحائف قاتمة حول تاريخ العرب و حضارتهم الإسلامية الزاهرة ... وهذا المقال يبرز هذه المعاني في المحاور التالية: 1. المعرفة التاريخية: إرساء الأسس. 2. لماذا نسجل التاريخ؟ 3. من يكتب التاريخ؟

الكلمات المفتاحية: المعرفة التاريخية، كتابة التاريخ، الوعي بالتاريخ، صفات المؤرخ، الحضارة الإسلامية

Historical Knowledge: Laying the Foundations

Retelling historical events should be primarily based on facts. Granted, this should be done in a manner that enables the historian to display his/her capabilities and creativity, but this does not mean that one should succumb to the temptation to present only those events that make us proud. Human history is not confined to events such as wars, the signing of treaties, the rise and fall of dynasties or the lives of once prominent and now forgotten personages. It is the shared experiences of human civilization, an ongoing project in human interaction, and an experiment where faiths and belief systems are put to the test to prove their veracity and realisticity.

While Arab and Muslim nations are unique in that their history still influences their present and seems to dictate their future, it has been the way of our forebears to regard historical knowledge, along with other branches of humanities, as trivial. Therefore, they tended to encourage the young to follow courses of study in applied sciences under the assumption that this will guarantee them a bright professional future and better social standing. Surprisingly, this is in spite of the fact that ‘the Holy Quran recited historical events in order to hone our perceptive abilities, bear our responsibilities, and reflect on our stance as civilized human beings. It provides us with the lessons necessary to overcome cultural stalemate which is not an inevitably enduring state of affairs as the rise and fall of any civilization are dictated by a set of historical conditions devised by Allah to guide human endeavour.’ (Alajami, 2010)

Therefore, it is now time to remedy this drawback and encourage our youth to pursue higher education studies in these fields. In addition, these areas of human knowledge should receive our special attention in order to prepare generations able to withstand the cultural challenges of modern times and build a brighter future. Understandably, educational institutions have the right to plan courses that guarantee employment for their future graduates. However, the real danger lies in the fact that such programmes in applied sciences do not prepare students to be able to add to their society and prevent its decline. Furthermore, their knowledge of the history of colossal Muslim and Arab contributions to human knowledge and the sciences would certainly set examples for them to admire and emulate. It is true that to know the future, you must know your past.

Historical knowledge does not necessarily mean clinging to the past, or being fixated on anarchic ideas and beliefs. In fact, it broadens the mind and distances one from fanaticism and extremism. That is because history is full of examples of peaceful coexistence among peoples with different faiths and beliefs, and of the futility of extremist ideas and creeds, and their lack of sound reason.

In contrast, a grasp of history can lead to a heightened sense of national identity; a goal that many modern states strive to achieve especially in response to threats from without, which attempt to

trivialize their history and cultural heritage. Algeria is a good example of this. In Algeria, it was the educated elite and learned historians who were aware that claims that Algeria had no proven history and that it was merely part of France propounded by such authors as Stéphane Gsell and Augustain Bernard and others had no other purpose but to strip the country of its Arab Muslim national identity. In response, they produced voluminous research, numerous articles, books, and school syllabi for free schools on the subject. For example, ‘Algeria’s Modern and Ancient History’ by Mohamed Mubarak Almeli, ‘Algeria’ by Ahmed Tawfiq Almadani, ‘A Brief History of Algeria from the Stone Age to French Occupation’ by Othman Alkaak, the most impressive volume ‘General History of Algeria’ compiled by Abdulrahman Aljilani as well as the copious research papers on the history of Algeria, North Africa, and the Arabs and Muslims in general written by Abdulaziz Althaalibi. These efforts raised the nation’s awareness of its true history and infused it with vigour to rise and liberate itself from occupation.

This kind of cultural conflict is inevitable. It can even be said that it has its advantages as struggle unifies a nation and draws it into competition with others without which it suffers stagnation. However, I believe this can only happen when:

- 1- the significance of historical events, and their protagonists and milieu, is highlighted and
- 2- this wealth of knowledge is presented in an attractive way that draws the young and educates them so they become more aware of their history and proud of their heritage. Arnold Joseph Toynbee proposed the principle of ‘fatherhood and sonhood’ referring to the bond between generations that is because a youth that is ignorant of the history of their forebears is disconnected from their past and present and unable to build their future. The prominent poet Ahmed Showqi succinctly puts this idea forward in the following verse:

A nation oblivious of its history is like
A foundling roaming the streets in search of kin
Or a demented amnesiac

Complaining of the torments of an unrecognizable past
These invigorating effects of cultural competition can only be achieved when written history is rid of exaggerations and untruths. Presented material should undergo thorough proofing and care should be taken that it enlightens the reader. It should also provide him with the right Muslim examples to follow - individuals known for both their openness and adherence to our traditions and heritage. Meanwhile, it should exclude those who are unable to see beyond cultural specifics or engage in open dialogue with the rest of the world and those who blindly follow an alien culture and, in discarding their own cultural references, become intellectual clients rather than producers. However, it is crucial that we do not fall prey to a sense of fatalism towards those conspiracies being devised against us and so become unable to evaluate ourselves and find the causes and remedies for any cultural ailments. Therefore, there is also an urgent need for a robust approach to revising the presentation of historical events that have long been misunderstood and shrouded in mystery. It is possible then, when we have recorded our history in a balanced and scientific manner, accurately employing a causal research approach, to instil a sophisticated understanding of history in our people such that can lead to a firm sense of identity, awareness and pride. This task falls to academic and scientific institutes supported by both the government and society.

I. Why do we record history?

- 1- We write history because retelling history is an innate need and a social necessity. However, although people love history, they fear and are in awe of it.
- 2- History is a tenet of any nation's heritage and a measure of its greatness and accomplishments. It is the foundation on which it rests its present and future.
- 3- Civilization is a human endeavour shared by all nations, no matter how minimal that share may be.
- 4- We refer to history not simply as an academic practice that we control in its entirety, but to draw attention to what it indicates and its effective laws and modi operandi. Also, in order to highlight the expected outcomes of events as dictated by these

natural laws of history. In doing so, we attempt to turn historical issues into effective action and a form of dialogue between the past, present and future. Historical facts cannot be ignored as they offer an opportunity to elucidate on the moral lessons that can be gleaned from them which can be effective in any other context. (Khalil, 2005)

- 5- Our modern and recent histories, as Muslim nations, suffer the same drawback of being recorded to satisfy central powers that, as victors, claim the right to rewrite history. It is true that the first few centuries since the inception of Islam, some accomplished historians produced some magnificent volumes on general and local histories, and biographies of notables and dynasties. However, records of our modern and recent histories are simply scattered unedited scripts that have been distorted by orientalist and colonists who rewrote it according to their whims. Where is the history of Muslims in Indonesia? It was erased by the Dutch, who occupied the country for over three centuries as did the French in Africa. Or indeed where is the history of the Muslims in the Caucasus or East and West Turkestan?
- 6- We record our history to forge our place in the world and to be able to contribute to the development of human civilization, a civilization where cultures meet and interact. Failing that, we will remain entrapped, regurgitating a distant past, and so our next generations will be unable to engage with the world.
- 7- History offers an insight into the essence of the life experiences of the true believer; a series of falls and recoveries, sin and repentance, without which their stories turn into a holy fixed script that stimulates but does not sustain or educate. The Quran narrates many such examples in order to instruct us, so it tells of Adam ‘thus did Adam disobey his God and allowed himself to fall into temptation,’ and of Noah pleading ‘O my Lord! I seek refuge with You from asking You that of which I have no knowledge,’ ‘And, indeed We did try Sulaiman,’ as for Yusuf ‘And indeed she did desire him and he would have inclined to

her desire,' and of Moses saying: 'My Lord! Lo! I have wronged my soul, so forgive me. Then He forgave him,' and to Mohamed:' May Allâh forgive you (O Muhammad SAW). Why did you grant them leave (for remaining behind)?'. These are examples to teach us all to follow those who, in spite of their sacred nature, remained human and liable to make mistakes. (Alshantiqi) Ibn Taimia comments that 'that who adheres to an objective moderate path would praise and befriend those who merit this treatment, he would be just, fair and merciful. He would understand that every human being has his/her commendable and regrettable sides and so liable to be both rewarded and punished, loved and hated at the same time.' (Salem, 1986)

- 8- After liberation, and when the freed and desired Pan-Arab state became less involved in the recording of history, it became clear that the emerging independent states had no clear vision of state building. This confused the political, and consequently, the cultural scene in the area. There also emerged a class of incapable and greedy men and women who surrounded the new rulers. These rulers were themselves simply a group of brave adventurers who lacked the cultural, intellectual and political sophistication to be able to gather around them other truly deserving scholars capable of recording history as based on fact and in accordance with the principles of the glorious revolutions that produced these fledgling states. This class of subjugates sat about to rewrite history according to the whims of the rulers which was detrimental to the establishment of a national school of historians.
- 9- We write history to dispel it of the traditional approaches and interpretations, which have turned most of it into legends, and tales of miracle work, wonders and the metaphysical, told by the soothsayers. Therefore, we need to record history according to a rational, scientific approach that places events in their context, and highlights the geographic and chronological constraints and realities that dictated the actions of those involved, without exaggeration, prejudice or justification.

10- We adopt an anthropological approach to write history. This enables us to know the structure and culture of human groups through their material artifacts and produce. Therefore, we record their daily lives and their consumption of foodstuffs and drinks. We study cultural products such as poetry, music, postcards, stamps, wall hangings, the archives of courts, endowments, hospitals and municipality, records of homelessness, begging, prostitution, prisons, cemeteries, tombstones, Sufism, magic and sorcery, birth and death, and written wills, historical records of family genealogy, love, sex, epidemics and famine, tastes, and those of the consumption of perishables such as coffee, tea, tobacco, alcohol, sugar, salt and grain.

II. Who Writes History?

- 1- A historian, like all other humans, is liable to feel pain and take a stand when recording history no matter how objective he/she may try to be.
- 2- A historian has high emotional intelligence that enables him to understand other people's motives and interpret their actions. Otherwise, she/he cannot understand the thoughts of those who shaped history. (Hussein, 1974)
- 3- History is not simply a matter of telling events. It is a sophisticated process, which involves the analysis of events and the revelation of their causes. Therefore, a historian records history, interprets events, is in touch with the present through a deep understanding of the past, and is not just someone who simply tells past events, fabricates facts, or is trapped in the past.
- 4- History is thoughtfully recorded, not simply told. It is ultimately the historian's choice which events to record. However, objectivity must be observed, which is a process starting with doubt and proceeding to the resumption of historical investigation, with examination and comparison, and finally the selection, of evidence. In this case, a historian conducts his work like a scientist determining the degree of probability that befits the existing evidence. (Southgate, 2001)

- 5- As for Islamic history, it is almost impossible to record without a full understanding of Islam as a faith, a theology and a moral code.
- 6- History is ultimately a record of human activities with all their psychological, moral and cultural dimensions. Therefore, a historian must be open-minded and avoid specialization, especially in its narrow and negative sense, which may render him/her unaware of other branches of science.
- 7- A true historian employs his present experiences to understand the past. It would be almost certainly impossible for a historian who is isolated himself from current events to understand and interpret that past and glean its lessons.
- 8- A historian does not echo the thoughts of others, but develops his/her own unique style, which is naturally, just as those of literary and intellectual figures, the product of a particular time and place. This is inevitable, no matter how hard one might try to deny it; otherwise, a scholar would be contradicting himself. Take for the example the works of Ibn al-Atheer, Ibn al-'Adim, al-Maqrizi, al-Jabrti, al-Shihabi, 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Douri, Abd Allah Alarawi. None of them could conceal their individuality, personalities, thought, environment, circumstance, era or culture. Every one of them is a true product of all of this. In contrast, the historian will have contradicted all this and trapped himself in the past, a mere shadow not of the present. This is the real cause of the grave setback experienced by our contemporary Arab intellectuals. (Aljameel)
- 9- A historian does not regard history with either awe or disdain. He deals with past events critically rather than with rapture, as all historical figures are fallible humans. There is also a big difference between our heritage and history. One then may wonder why historians have no impact on society today even when many have given their lives to record it only to have their life endeavour stowed away in old desk drawers collecting dust, and only occasionally sought by a keen reader or a very specialized academician.

- 10- A historian has to link the events of the past with issues of the present. This requires keen intellect and memory. Only then can the recording of history be an intellectual process that can utilize history for forming a comprehensive view of the future. As a historian, one must start with a historical story and be armed with clear vision; it is also essential that he has the knowledge of historical events, and can analyze and interpret them to reach sound conclusions.
- 11- A writer of history must immerse himself in it so that he can convey a vivid, almost palpable, picture to the reader. Our lives are not lived according to concrete mathematical formulae or to rigid military formations. Therefore, a historian must express it in all its humanity and tribulations, illuminating all the intellectual and psychological motives that instigated historical events. (Awais, 2009)
- 12- He who writes history must use its events as intellectual tools that can help deal with current thorny issues. It has been noted that in recent years, when current Arab thinking turned to the matter of progress, historians have had very little presence. Scholars in such fields as sociology, philosophy, or political science often tackle the issues by citing historical events even though they lack the appropriate tools of induction, referencing, or verification. I believe that this is mainly due to the noticeable gap left by the historians.
- 13- Those who write history must not turn their pens into tools of the authorities that seek to get them to write and falsify history according to their whims and wishes. A true honest historian would not deign to do so but rather would produce historical records that are public intellectual property open to criticism, editing and revising.
- 14- History should be written by someone who has a clear vision for an integrated cultural project. He possesses the tools, methods, and rigors of the historian, while still being aware of and open to the use of tools from other fields of study that can help him modify his perspectives and rectify his interpretations.

In my view, the self-imposed isolation of contemporary historians, the lack of scientific missions overseas, and the distraction of academic researchers in their strive to meet the demands of life all contribute greatly to a stagnant intellectual scene.

- 15- To write history, one must avoid the pitfalls of historiography in his analysis, criticism, or inspiration, such as relying on old sources when discussing political theology and indicating that these sources record factual events. Reality is that such aspirations as recorded in historiographical accounts of the political theology of old Muslim dynasties were not achieved then. We cite here as an example Ibn Hazm Althaheri's classification of rulers into dissolute, licentious, pious, and weak, and their treatment in share'a, which has no basis in reality or reflects the true relationship that existed between ruler and ruled. This kind of jurisprudence has not been considered since the Umayyad era. Meanwhile, historical records from the time show that few rulers were in fact pious and that had nothing to do with any attempts by the nation to get them to mend their ways.
- 16- History should be written by those who are able to consider history in a comprehensive manner. Granted, a historian would focus on a certain part of history, but this does not mean that an event (the fall of Baghdad for example) simply starts and ends at a particular point of time. This is because it is difficult to comprehend and study history in its entirety. In this respect, a historian's work is analogous to that of a scientist who examines a minute sample of a large tree under the microscope. Therefore, a historian would select a particular event for careful study and analysis because it is not possible to understand the time of the Abbasids or Umayyads without comprehending the times of the Caliphs.
- 17- A writer of history should not dissect it into isolated events. This would lead to obsession with the event and neglect of important factors, such as the chronological, geographical and human factors that influence it. This limited view could be

intentional in order to detract and mislead the readers, or it could happen unintentionally. (Albualyan)

18- History should be written by those brave enough to carefully and objectively explore historical events. In so doing, he/she cannot be intimidated by the dissatisfied masses, who are loath to understand the causes of their ills. Enemies of the nation also prefer to see it ignorant of its issues so that these ailments would fester.

19- To write history, one should firmly believe that the historical experiences of our forebears cannot replace the factual text but are merely a tool to understand and explain the text. The influences of sectarianism and political affiliations resulted in a situation where these experiences are viewed not within the framework of 'chronological history' but within that of unthinking acceptance, so much so that it became part of the Muslim faith.

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