



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

WHY HISTORY?

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Reference:

Esmail, Aziz. "Why History?" *Africa Ismaili* (1970): 20-27.

Abstract

In this short but important article, the author asks the question "What is History?" and how does the study of history benefit a community at a particular time? By moving beyond a definition of history as simply "facts about the past," the essay attempts to show how interpretation and the historian themselves affect the writing of history. The essay concludes with an attempt to show the value of history in the lives of a community and how history itself helps to foster a sense of understanding and identity.

In a few places, the author appeals to the experience of the Ismaili communities as the article had been solicited by an Ismaili magazine. More generally, he quotes examples from Islamic history. But these references are illustrative rather than primary, and the aim of the article is to illuminate the significance of all history as such, and the issues of interest and concern to all historians who reflect systematically on their craft.

Keywords

History, Past, Present, Future, Facts, Interpretations, Identity.

Introduction

Of all the subjects taught in our universities, history is the least properly understood. Every month sees a spate of history text-books, volumes, and paper backs flooding the market. Yet both among intellectuals and lay people, this subject is scarcely understood in any depth. This is especially surprising since history is an ancient pursuit. Its very antiquity, however, makes it prone to neglect and misunderstanding. This inadequacy is brought out in various ways. Some people show at best a condescending tolerance for professional historians. Others worship them as men with a "fantastic memory". In this article, I propose to discuss the nature and uses of history. Thus I will try to answer two essential questions: What is history? And how does the study of history benefit a group of people at a given moment of time? My examples will be drawn primarily from Islamic history. Finally, I will make a few general remarks about why I think the study of history has a special place in our community at present.

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stress fell on mutual help and corporate solidarity. You can see how these different interpretations would lead to emphasis on different facts. The historian who thought that the triumph of the new religion was a consequence of the atrophy of the old forms of worship, would be apt to concentrate on evidence about pre-Islamic beliefs, and in particular, on any hints of dissatisfaction over these beliefs among the Arabs. The other historian, who might be inclined to attach importance to the growth of an Arabic consciousness as the chief ingredient in Islam, will naturally be led to stress the sense of pride exhibited in pre-Islamic poetry. He will also draw attention to the fact that there had been repeated incursions into Arabia by Romans, the Persians, and Axumites. Furthermore, he will tend to attach particular significance to independent Arab Kingdoms, such as the Nabataeans and the Palmyrenes who, he will argue, reflected a sense of independence among the Arabs long before the days of Islam, and of which Islam marked a lasting culmination. On the other hand, we find that Montgomery Watt is particularly struck by the fact that the early part of Prophet Muhammad's mission consisted of repeated references to social ethics, such as honesty in business, ho



exhausted as a result of prolonged fighting; that over-taxation and religious persecution had turned their subjects against them; and that the Arabs, galvanised by the energy of their new faith, delivered the last, lethal blow to these already prostrate giants. Thus we have significantly different interpretations for an event of vital consequence. All history is essentially an exercise in interpreting the doings of men. The element of interpretation, however, is something much more than subjective opinion. The professional historian does not form his judgements in a vacuum, nor does he base them on the dictates of mere impulse. These conclusions always involve a step by step building up of argument. The historian, like the adjudicator in a legal case, has to marshal the evidence at his disposal in order. to arrive at



hence the general assumption always was that the rest of the world had no distinctive histories



brought it into being in the first place, and shaped it through its career. To help us understand how the religions, the institutions, and the nations in which we find ourselves came to be what they are is one of the prime functions of history.

Transcending the Present

By extending one's consciousness in time, a sense of history heightens one's capacity for transcendence over the immediate present. To feel the past alive in one's bones, to rise above