THE PAST IN POWER: WHY IGNORING HISTORY RISKS GHANA'S FUTURE

AUTHORNAME: MAVIS ASAMOAH

Mavis Asamoah is a first class   BA History graduate from the Kwame Nkrumah University Of Science Technology.She Also Works As A Research And Teaching Assistant At The Department Of History And Political Science .She Is Currently A Prospective Masters Student At Northern Illinois University Starting Fall 2025

EMAIL: Mavisasamoah818@gmail.com

COUNTRY: Ghana

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between historical consciousness and policy effectiveness in Ghana. The research investigates why technically sound policies mostly fail to achieve intended outcomes despite adequate design and implementation resources. Using qualitative analysis of policy reception patterns, the study finds that historical memory significantly influences public response to government interventions. Evidence from the Electronic Transfer Levy implementation, land administration programs, and structural adjustment experiences reveals that citizens evaluate contemporary policies against past experiences of state exploitation. The research identifies three key factors: colonial legacies shape institutional frameworks, collective memory influences policy legitimacy, and historical amnesia among policymakers perpetuates exclusionary practices. Urban planning policies continue colonial spatial arrangements, while land formalization efforts trigger resistance rooted in dispossession experiences. The study concludes that effective policy design requires integration of historical analysis into development planning. Ghana needs policymakers who understand how past experiences create present institutional challenges and citizen expectations.

Keywords

Historical consciousness, policy reception, institutional memory, colonial legacies, Ghana, development planning, state legitimacy, structural adjustment, land tenure, urban planning, national identity, foreign policy, governance, traditional institutions

Introduction

Over the years, people have held divergent views about what history is and what it entails. In Ghana today, and in many parts of the world, there are some people who go as far as thinking that studying history does not have tangible benefits. There are people who consider getting a degree in history as a pathway to nowhere because it offers no clear opportunities for employment. Others simply boil down the discipline to memorizing dates and names of deceased kings, queens, and other so-called important people whose narratives no longer

appear significant. This way of thinking especially among students and even policymakers is a dangerous misunderstanding of what history truly is and what it can do.

But what really is history? First of all, let it be said that history is not memorizing names and dates. History is a way of thinking about change, continuity, context, and consequence. It is the ability to master questioning about how societies develop, why institutions rise or fall, and how choices made in the past shape outcomes in the present. As E.H. Carr has explained, history is "an unending dialogue between the present and the past" (Carr, 1961). History for Carr, is not a straightforward set of facts; instead, it is posing questions to the past in light of the questions of the present. It is a dynamic, continuous process of making sense regarding how things in the past connect with the things of the present. In the same way, Arthur Marwick explained history as "the attempt to discover on the basis of fragmentary evidence, the significant things about the past" (Marwick, 2001). He stressed that history is not a task of mere recording, but interpreting the records in an systematic manner so that one learns about human action and social change. Such interpretation lends a utilitarian significance to history.it enables people to draw lessons from past success and failures in order to construct better futures. In this sense, to say history is only about dead people is not just misleading; it is intellectually lazy. More importantly, such thinking overlooks the fact that history helps us understand present challenges and imagine better futures.

In today's world, history matters more than ever. Ghana, like many other African nations is navigating the long shadows of colonial economic structures, political fragmentation, and the tensions of modern nationhood. Many of these challenges are rooted in historical processes including land expropriation, extractive economic systems, inherited institutions, and fragmented social fabrics. Ignoring these histories in the name of moving forward often leads to repeating old mistakes. In fact, development planning that is not historically informed risks being short-sighted, ineffective, or even harmful. In due of this, this study argues that history is not just a matter of national identity or academic interest. It is an important tool for sustainable development, economic transformation, and sound policy design.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach that combines observational analysis with secondary source review. The research examines public responses to recent Ghana policies including the Electronic Transfer Levy, land administration programs, and urban planning initiatives. Observation of actual policy reception patterns provides authentic Information on how citizens respond to government interventions without formal interviews. The study also reviews scholarly literature to understand how colonial and postcolonial experiences shape current policy outcomes. This methodology is suitable because it captures real citizen behavior toward policies while using existing scholarship to explain the historical reasons behind these responses. The approach allows comprehensive analysis of policy effectiveness without requiring extensive primary data collection.

Why History Matters for Policymaking: Understanding Popular Reception and Policy Outcomes in Ghana

A policy is basically a choice about how to change society. But too often, these choices are made without a clear understanding of where societies have come from or how similar efforts have gone in the past. History is important for making policy because it helps us understand how intricate social change is, how institutions work, and how planned and unplanned initiatives will affect people in the long term. If policy is made without a sense of history, it could be shallow, short-sighted, or even harmful. History may not provide us answers, but it does give us the tools we need to ask better questions, see patterns, and understand how institutions, communities, and ideas change over time.

In Ghana, public opinion and institutional trust are two of the most obvious ways that history influences policymaking. History has a role in development policy that goes beyond merely describing the beginnings of state institutions or how a nation's resources were influenced by its past. According to T. Walker, history is important because past experiences particularly those of exclusion, dispossession, and perceived injustice influence how people respond to new policies (Walker, 2005). Recollections of colonialism, nationalism, authoritarianism, and economic reform have a significant impact on Ghanaian public sentiments regarding state policy. Whether someone believes a policy is fair, trusts it, or feels empowered to follow it depends on these memories. while economists often view policy through the lens of material incentives and initial conditions, these do not fully explain why some policies succeed and others fail. One cannot separate how a policy is taken in from how people see it, and how people see it is shaped by history (Walker, 2005). For example, people may not support a policy even if it would help them if it looks like something that has happened in the past that was unfair or left out. In these situations, the historical connections of the policy are more important than its economic content. This happens a lot in Ghana. People object to welfare programs because they remember how state aid used to be given out based on who you knew, or how colonial and postcolonial states used their power to control or punish people instead of helping them. These memories are often collected and inherited and are not just personal. According to Walker, memory has a political function since it influences the way individuals view policy as legitimate or suspects and helps them interpret new experiences in the context of previous ones (Walker, 2005). Even when people misremember the past or simplify it, the effect on policy uptake is real. The state is not always able to control how its policies are understood because they are introduced into a field of meanings already shaped by previous state actions. The Ghanaian government for instance may suggest a technologically advanced and equitable tax reform, but if it feels to them like a return to colonial hut taxes or adjustment-period austerity, they can reject it. It is not so much the substance of the reform that counts but the fact that it reminds them of previous forms of dispossession. During colonial times, most of the policies like forced labor, taxation, or agricultural policies were implemented through coercive institutions like the Native Authorities and police where they often worked with minimal regard for the well-being of the African population. These experiences created deep cynicism about top-down interventions, especially involving bureaucratic discretion. For instance, the 2021 Electronic Transfer Levy (E-Levy) was created officially in the efforts to mobilize domestic resources and fund infrastructure, but most Ghanaians saw it as just another means by which the government was scheming to loot citizens without transparency. More than technical flaws, the general mistrust of the people on the E-Levy stemmed from colonial and postcolonial experiences with fiscal exploitation(Agyeiwaa-Afrane et al.,2022).This explains why current policies like the Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) program has struggled with acceptance and implementation in spite of their interventions. Most

of the citizens have questioned the transparency and fairness of beneficiary choice as such endeavors is a reflection of past injustices where government aid was seen to favor certain regions, ethnic groups, or political affiliations(Sulemana et al.,2019)

No discussion of this argument would be complete without mentioning or making reference to the Ghanaian experience during the structural adjustment period of the 1980s. The Ghanaian structural adjustment experience is one that best describes the long-lasting impact of history on policy reception. The economic crisis during the early 1980s and the institution of economic reforms introduced by the World Bank and IMF by the PNDC government had led to policies of cost recovery, privatization, and liberalization. Structural adjustment led to mass layoffs in the public sector, the collapse of local industries, and the commodification of healthcare and education through "cash and carry" systems (Boafo-Arthur, 2002). This collective memory has had long-term effects. Ghanaians today are cautious about policies labeled as "market reforms" or involving subsidy cuts. When electricity sector reforms tied to the Millennium Challenge Compact were introduced in the 2010s, many citizens and labor unions opposed them on the grounds that they threatened job security and public access despite official assurances that the reforms were meant to improve efficiency. Here again, popular memory of adjustment-era suffering shaped how Ghanaians interpreted new policies which reveals that the perceived moral intent of reforms often matters more than their technical details.Although these reforms were presented as rational and necessary, they failed to account for the social memory of citizens who experienced these years as a period of abandonment by the states (Konadu-Agyemang, 2000).These responses are shaped not just by present economic calculations, but by embedded memories of past hardship and unmet promises. For policymakers then, historical knowledge needs to be added to the logical cost-benefit analysis model for policymakers. Clearly, why people resist certain policies often has little to do with the narrow logic of present gains or losses.

Historical experience also shapes the ideas and assumptions that policymakers themselves bring to the table. Colonial legacies are still evident in urban development and urban planning in Ghana. Cities like Accra were designed during the colonial era to keep European neighbourhoods apart from African communities, where affluent areas were designated for normal layouts and sanitary facilities. Although they were not incorporated into planning frameworks, informal settlements were accepted (Grant & Yankson, 2003). These spatial biases still exist today as state approaches to urban planning tend to emphasise order, legality, and aesthetics in ways that systematically exclude informal markets and settlements. For example, when authorities demolished the Old Fadama settlement in Accra, the official justification was environmental degradation and city beautification, but for many residents, this echoed earlier histories of relocation or displacement without compensation, patterns established under colonial rule and continued by postcolonial elites.((Scholz, and Dayaram,2015).

The planners and politicians in charge of such demolitions are also operating within inherited frameworks that link modernity with control and informality with disorder. This means that the historical roots of elite spatial imaginaries are not just academic; they have a direct impact on who gets to live where and under what conditions.

Perhaps nowhere is the historical shaping of policy more vivid than in the system of land ownership. Particularly in peri-urban areas where traditional systems still hold great strength, attempts to formalize land ownership in Ghana have often run against resistance. For instance, the World Bank-backed Land Administration Project (LAP), which was started in the early 2000s, sought to promote investment, streamline land records, and lower litigation. However, many of the residents living outskirt of Accra including Amanfrom saw land titling programs as a front for eviction. This reaction is based on a long record of forced evictions and compulsory acquisitions under colonial and postcolonial governments. The state has frequently expropriated land in the name of the public interest in order to expand Accra, only to sell or lease the land to elites or private developers. These memories fuel the belief that land formalization is in the interests of the elite and not of common persons (Amanor,2008). Even if titling programs are conceptually well designed technically, they will never be legitimate if they fail to engage this history with honesty and respect.

Having stated the aforementioned, it is also important to note that history plays a role in policymaking that extends beyond material legacies. It functions by way of collective perception as well. Ghana's educational system provides an example. Basic education has been given priority by several governments, most recently in 2017 with the implementation of the Free Senior High School (SHS) policy. The policy is widely popular, not just because of its overt benefits, but because it addresses a deep national ideology: that education unlocks mobility. This belief runs extremely deep in Ghanaian social history. During the colonial period, education at mission schools allowed some Africans to qualify for clerical and professional jobs. Post-independence politicians such as Nkrumah were themselves products of the system and advocated for education as a development mechanism and as a nation-building tool. Education increasingly became a symbol of personal progress and national progress(Foster,1965). The symbolic weight of free education maintains strong public support even in situations where empirical data on the quality of public education may yield conflicting results. Therefore, policymakers must comprehend this historical narrative in order to create reforms that reinforce deeply held beliefs rather than contradict them.

The Relevance of History in Foreign Policy and National Development, Can Lessons Be Learnt?

It should be underlined once more that a country is unlikely to create a meaningful future if it does not comprehend its past. This is not merely a rhetorical statement; it is also a practical observation, especially for African nations where historical omissions or misuses frequently have dire repercussions. History is important in foreign policy and national development because it determines the agenda for how nations represent themselves, interact with one another, and envision advancement. National development does not start with rails and roads; it starts with a common vision of identity. Without this, development becomes fragmented and politicized. In some African countries, a lack of historical awareness has led to tribal, ethnic, or regional loyalties breaking up national unity. Most of the time, this leads to a country where people see themselves first as members of their ethnic group and only second as citizens of the state. The late Ali Mazrui, in his extensive work on African political thought, argued that colonialism left African states with borders but not nations, and postcolonial leaders failed to build common identity because they either ignored history or manipulated it for personal gain

(Mazrui, 1986). History is one of the ways that policymakers can gain insight into how society has changed, where they went wrong, where they were able to get some things right, and how power and identity have been developed along the way. Perhaps one of the most basic but lesser-known tidbits is that history gives nations a sense of identity which I think is an identity that unites people and enables people to grow together. When leaders ignore the histories of their nations, they risk deepening divisions that undermine nation-building. As Were reminds us, the majority of African countries inherited colonial borders that mixed heterogeneous ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups with no such collective histories. In these situations, national unity has to be nurtured deliberately. Knowledge of the past can trace instances of shared struggle, common heritage, and shared experience that build national unity. Without it, as in the case of post-independence life in the majority of African nations, individuals will identify themselves in the first instance as members of their region or tribe, and not of a state.(Were,1979). This is a problem with dangerous implications. Where there is weak national identity in states, political recruitment, planning for development, and public expenditure are likely to be undertaken on the basis of regional patronage or ethnic loyalty instead of national interest. The end product is uneven development, grievance, and at times violent conflict or what alter Rodney (1972) called "deliberate underdevelopment," where entire groups are systematically denied enjoyment of the fruits of modern infrastructure, education, and medical facilities. In Uganda during Idi Amin, for instance, political survival and ethnic struggle for power took precedence over national development. History testifies that the regime of Amin unleashed brutality to kill actual and perceived enemies regardless of its long-term effects. The government's inability to learn or be concerned with the complexity of Uganda's colonial and post-colonial past resulted in the destruction of its social fabric, economic infrastructure, and diplomatic reputation(Mutibwa, 1992).

 The nation became so disoriented that it took generations to recover. Such is the result when leadership is separated from history knowledge particularly where there is exercise of power in ignorance of the roads already traveled and the errors already committed. Conversely, however, a leadership attuned to history would seek to heal the past, construct inclusive institutions, and enact policies that seek to remedy historical injustices. Post-apartheid South Africa is a case in point. Nelson Mandela's transition to democracy was characterized by a conscious appeal to historical memory in pursuing reconciliation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, while imperfect, was based on the idea that acknowledging the past honestly could help the country move forward(Verdery, 1999).It acknowledged that in a society where past injustices are disregarded or denied, progress cannot be made. Here, historical knowledge acted as a link between a shared future and a divided past.

The significance of history transcends national boundaries. Foreign policy choices are frequently based on a nation's perception of its role in the world, which is, in my opinion, influenced by its past. An obvious example of the aforementioned point is the influence of historical ties on trade relations. Many African nations still trade mostly with former colonial powers, not always because it makes economic sense but rather because of long-standing dependency structures that were never reexamined after gaining independence(Cooper, 2019).Nations can use history to inform their foreign policy decisions. A nation is better equipped to negotiate agreements that safeguard its interests when it is aware of its diplomatic past. Understanding the past aids countries in comprehending the structure of previous trade agreements, as well as who gained and who lost. It enables enables policymakers to spot trends,

steer clear of blunders, and advocate for more equitable arrangements.For instance, Ghana's trade has long been influenced by its historical ties to Britain, but in recent years, the nation has worked to diversify its partners by forging closer ties with China and other African countries.

This is not random; rather, it is based on the knowledge that relying too heavily on one historical ally may restrict one's sovereignty and negotiating leverage. During the Cold War, for instance, many African states were drawn into geopolitical contests between the West and the Soviet bloc. Countries like Angola, Mozambique, and the Congo became battlegrounds for foreign powers, not because of any local ideology, but because of the strategic value attached to their resources and positions. These interventions cannot be understood or undone. without a historical lens(Westad, 2005).

 Furthermore, foreign policy that is based on historical amnesia could create dangerous mistakes. The early 1990s U.S. military engagement in Somalia, for instance, disregarded important historical factors such as the fall of the Barre regime, the clan-based character of Somali politics, and the legacy of colonial rule that had partitioned Somali lands among several European powers. The intervention was framed in humanitarian terms but ended in disaster, largely because the U.S. failed to grasp the historical complexity of Somali society(Bowden, 1999). In a similar vein, the popular 1993 Black Hawk Down incident was not just a military failure but was a failure of historical understanding. It revealed how foreign policy, even when driven by good intentions, can produce chaos if it ignores the history of the country involved.

Once more, history is important because it teaches leaders the distinction between national service and personal ambition. Leaders are prone to repeat past mistakes when they disregard or misinterpret history.Zaire which is now the Democratic Republic of Congo under Mobutu Sese Seko is a clear example. Mobutu created a cult of personality while ignoring the basic needs of the people and the lessons of past misrule. He looted the wealth of the nation, making one of Africa's wealthiest a bankrupt nation (Young and Turner, 1985).The government was not lacking resources or even ideas on paper; it lacked the capacity to learn from history and translate its lessons to the conduct of business. Similarly, Jean-Bédel Bokassa in Central African Republic went to the extreme of abusing power and declared himself emperor in a grand ceremony that cost a whopping $50 million equivalent to half of the nation's budget then. The irony hurts. In a nation where the people were deprived of basic amenities, the nation's leader used public funds to copy colonial monarchy.(Bobb 1999). This was a direct consequence of ignoring the lessons of history. Had Bokassa listened to the lessons of colonialism and the failures of earlier African dictators, he could have understood that legitimacy is constructed on substance, not spectacle.

History also plays a crucial role in development planning. Effective planning depends on data regarding population growth, employment trends, income levels, and social needs. A planner cannot create realistic policies if they are only aware of the current population figures and are unaware of the causes of regional imbalances, economic disparities, or population shifts. Historical knowledge allows planners to trace the roots of current problems and to project future needs based on past and present trends. For example, understanding the historical reasons for rural underdevelopment including colonial land policies, displacement, or neglect can help target investment more effectively. Without this background, efforts could be superficial or misguided. Development is not a clean slate.It builds on the past. If that past is misunderstood, neglected, or unknown, planning becomes guesswork.

Once more, when leaders ignore the historical processes underlying state formation and institutional development, national development suffers. One of the major challenges facing many African states is the persistence of what some scholars call "institutional hybridity" which is a mix of formal state institutions and informal traditional or local systems. (Boege et al., 2009). This hybridity is not a design flaw but a product of colonial and pre-colonial history. Colonial administrations often ruled through local chiefs, creating dual structures of authority. After independence, many African states tried to impose Western-style bureaucracies without considering the legitimacy or historical role of traditional institutions. This led to conflicts of authority, inefficiency, and a disconnect between the state and the people. A historically informed approach to governance would recognize and integrate these systems, rather than ignore or suppress them. It should be emphasized once more that the failure to use history in 3this way leads to the elevation of mediocrity and the sidelining of merit. In states where political appointments are made based on ethnic or political loyalty, not competence, development suffers. when meritocracy becomes irrelevant, key positions are filled by "dead wood" or better put "people with no vision, skill, or commitment to the public good." They see the state not as a vehicle for collective progress, but as a source of personal gain. The state becomes a "milch cow," not something to be nourished, but something to be drained. This mindset is both a cause and a result of historical ignorance. Without a sense of national purpose grounded in historical identity, there is no incentive to serve the public or to invest in long-term development.

Lastly, historical knowledge also promotes civic values and ethical governance. When people learn about the achievements and failures of past leaders, they can better evaluate their current ones. History offers models of courage, justice, and leadership, as well as warnings about tyranny, greed, and incompetence. This is especially important in countries where democratic institutions are weak or under threat. A well-informed citizenry, aware of its historical struggles and victories, is less likely to accept authoritarianism or corruption. Conversely, leaders who are aware of the weight of history are more likely to act responsibly. They know they will be judged not only by voters or foreign partners, but by posterity.

Conclusion

History serves as the foundation for understanding contemporary challenges and shaping effective solutions across all societies. This paper addressed a critical problem in development policy regarding why well-designed policies often fail in Ghana despite their technical soundness. The central argument advanced is that policy failure occurs when governments ignore the historical experiences that shape how citizens understand and respond to state interventions.

The analysis revealed three key findings. First, historical memory actively influences how Ghanaians receive contemporary policies. The rejection of the Electronic Transfer Levy, resistance to land formalization programs, and suspicion of market reforms all stem from colonial and postcolonial experiences of exploitation rather than from economic calculations alone. Second, policymakers themselves operate within inherited frameworks that reproduce historical patterns of exclusion. Urban planning policies that demolish informal settlements and land policies that favor elites continue colonial practices of dispossession and spatial control. Third, successful policy design requires understanding how past experiences create present expectations and fears.

The key takeaway from this paper is straightforward but profound. History is not background noise in policymaking but the foundation upon which all policy interventions must build. Governments that ignore this reality design policies that citizens interpret through lenses of historical betrayal, guaranteeing resistance and failure. Leaders who take historical memory seriously, on the other hand, can create interventions that speak to a shared experience and foster institutional trust.This means that Ghana's policy design needs to embrace.For Ghana, this translates into a need for policy design to move beyond technical solutions and take into account awareness of history. Instead of seeing history as lying in the way of progress, policymakers need to see history as an essential tool for comprehending why specific policies work or fail. The practical moral is evident. Sustainable development is based not only on economic planning but on historical literacy by those who lead. It is only when the leaders realize how the past shapes the present that they can make policies that actually benefit the country's future.

ACKNOWLEGMENT

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