

## J. F. ADE AJAYI, 1929–2014

The news of the death of Professor J. F. Ade Ajayi, the foremost African historian, on 9 August 2014 came as a shock to many in the academic community. Ajayi had distinguished himself as a historian of note and had come to be associated with the African past. His academic activities and influence went beyond the shores of his native country, Nigeria, and even beyond the African continent. On his eighty-fifth birthday in May 2014, his former students and associates had celebrated him with the public presentation of a 558-page Festschrift cum biography entitled *J. F. Ade Ajayi: his life and career*.<sup>1</sup> Little did anyone realize that that was to be his last major public appearance. Three months later, he passed away peacefully after hosting his children and grandchildren who had come to spend the summer with him in Ibadan.

Jacob Festus Adeniyi Ajayi was born in Ikole-Ekiti, south-western Nigeria, and he attended Christ School, Ado-Ekiti and Igbobi College, Lagos from 1940 to 1946. He spent one year at the Yaba Higher College, Lagos, before proceeding to the newly established University College, Ibadan (UCI) in 1948. As a pioneer student at UCI, he obtained in 1951 a BA General Degree in History, Latin and Classics. He received a Nigerian government scholarship to read an honours degree in history at the University of Leicester from 1952 to 1955. There, he met Professor Jack Simmons, who, he claimed, ‘made a historian out of him’.<sup>2</sup> He graduated with a first class degree in 1955. Thereafter, he proceeded to the University of London for graduate studies. His doctoral thesis on Christian missions in Nigeria was supervised by Professor G. S. Graham. Ajayi chose this topic because missionary records contained rich African-oriented material that emphasized African participation in the missionary enterprise. This type of source was important at a time when African scholars were trying to make a case for the viability of African history. Ajayi successfully defended his thesis in 1958 and then secured an appointment as Lecturer Grade II in the Department of History at UCI. His return to Ikole-Ekiti, his hometown, was celebrated with the traditional twenty-one gun salute reserved for royalty and VIPs. He was the first PhD holder in the entire community.

Ajayi settled down to a promising career in the history department at UCI under the headship of Dr Kenneth Onwuka Dike. The task facing Ibadan scholars at that time was the Africanization of the curriculum. In addition to this, Ajayi continued to teach, mentor and assist several students. In the course of his career in Ibadan and elsewhere, he made his mark in scholarship, administration and academic reproduction. He was promoted full professor in Ibadan in 1963.

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Omolewa and Akinjide Osuntokun (eds) *J. F. Ade Ajayi: his life and career*. Ibadan: Bookcraft and Jadeas Trust, 2014.

<sup>2</sup>Festus Ogunlade, ‘Post-secondary education years, 1947–1958’ in M. Omolewa and A. Osuntokun (eds) *J. F. Ade Ajayi*, p. 86.

In terms of scholarship, J. F. Ade Ajayi was a central figure in the major debates and trends that shaped African history. He belonged to the first generation of Nigerian historians, which included K. O. Dike and S. O. Biobaku. Together with Dike, he defined the essence of African historiography. This generation challenged the claims of European colonial historiography about the African past. Their mission was to decolonize African history from the grip of Eurocentric authors who claimed that Africa had no history worth studying. Ajayi and his colleagues wrote nationalist history, emphasized African agency and initiative, and presented the past from an Afrocentric perspective. Before the advent of the Ibadan School of History with which Ajayi later became identified, two books had already prepared the ground by focusing principally on intra-African relations, with little attention paid to European activities. These were *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* (1956) by Kenneth Dike and *Egba and their Neighbours* (1957) by S. O. Biobaku.

As the doyen of the Ibadan School of History, Ajayi, together with other Africanists in Ibadan and elsewhere, highlighted the importance of oral traditions as historical sources and embraced the multidisciplinary approach to data collection. He was general editor of the Ibadan History Series, which was inaugurated by his seminal work *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891: the making of a new elite* (1966). The series published numerous PhD theses produced mainly in the University's Department of History. In addition, Ajayi and his colleagues prepared the secondary school history curriculum, wrote textbooks for history undergraduates, and published the *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria (JHSN)* and *Tarikh: A Journal of African History for Schools*. The textbooks published included *A Thousand Years of West African History* (1965), edited by J. F. Ade Ajayi and Ian Espie; *Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1966), edited by J. C. Anene and G. Brown; *History of West Africa*, Volumes 1 and 2 (1971 and 1974), edited by J. F. Ade Ajayi and Michael Crowder; and *Groundwork of Nigerian History* (1980), edited by Obaro Ikime.

Nationalist historiography has been criticized as being too empirical and lacking in theoretical rigour. Some critics claim that it is irrelevant to the challenges of underdevelopment and perennial poverty facing post-independence Africa. However, it must be noted that the Ibadan approach to history, like that of the Dakar School, served the needs of the moment. It helped to decolonize the African past and foster national identity. Ajayi believed that African history and culture have a role to play in nation building, particularly in fostering identity between the inherited postcolonial state and the heterogeneous peoples who constituted its building blocks. He presented colonialism as a mere episode in African history and emphasized continuity and change as the essence of history.

His other publications included: *Milestones in Nigerian History* (1962); *UNESCO General History of Africa: Volume VI* (1989); *History and the Nation and Other Addresses* (1990); *Tradition and Change in Africa* (a collection of essays edited by Toyin Falola, 1999); *A Patriot to the Core: Samuel Ajayi Crowther* (2001); 'A critique of themes preferred by Nigerian historians' (*JHSN* 10: 3, 1980); and 'Towards a more enduring sense of history' (*JHSN* 12: 3&4, 1984). Volume VI of the *UNESCO General History of Africa* is particularly important because the revolutionary nineteenth century that it documents has been dubbed the 'African age of improvement'.

Ajayi dedicated his life and career to historical scholarship and succeeded in helping to reconfigure the place and position of the African in global history.

This had several results, one of which was to make African history a legitimate field of study and pave the way for historians of Africa to acquire international laurels and stand shoulder to shoulder with historians of other climes.

A significant portion of Professor Ajayi's efforts was invested in institution building. He provided purposeful and fruitful leadership to the Historical Society of Nigeria, of which he was Vice President (1967–72) and President (1972–81). This made him the most visible leader of the history profession in Nigeria since the 1960s. Even after he retired from the University of Ibadan in 1989, he remained a reference point for the profession. As Vice Chancellor of the University of Lagos from 1972 to 1978, he left an enviable administrative legacy. He transformed the academic landscape by restructuring and popularizing the faculty system and phasing out the Schools. In terms of physical development, he constructed twenty-one new buildings, which included students' hostels, faculty buildings and service buildings such as the conference centre and guest houses. He established successful staff development programmes through which new units such as chemical engineering were built from scratch into stable departments. The university grew rapidly under him. He is fondly remembered in the University of Lagos as the vice chancellor who stood up for students and staff against pressure from the military government in the 1970s, which eventually led to his unceremonious removal.

His administrative experience went beyond the University of Lagos. In the 1970s, he served on the governing councils of several universities outside Nigeria: namely, Cape Coast University Ghana, University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana (now Kwame Nkrumah University), University of Lesotho, and the United Nations University, Tokyo. He was also Chairman of the Executive Council of the International African Institute, London, from 1975 to 1984, where he guided the organization to overcome a difficult time of financial hardship. He was Vice President of the Association of African Universities and of the Royal African Society in London. He also served at the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) as a member of the Group of Eminent Persons on Reparations and as chair of its Research and Documentation Committee.

Perhaps Ajayi's most enduring mark was made in the area of academic reproduction. He trained and mentored several generations of historians directly and indirectly. He personally handled (with assistance from Dr G. A. Akinola) the compulsory MA course on Theories and Concepts of History upon his return to the University of Ibadan after his retirement. It is to his credit that his most productive years in terms of PhD supervision came after he had officially retired. His doctoral candidates included James Obiegbu, Kyari Mohammed, Oladele Adeoti, Gabriel Nyityo, Babatunde Sofela Yinka Ajayi, Timothy Erinsho and myself. Before this group, there had been an older generation of students he taught and mentored, which included Professors Adiele Afigbo, Obaro Ikime, Michael Omolewa, Jide Osuntokun, J. A. Atanda, Anthony Asiwaju, Okon Uya, Joseph Inikori, Tunji Oloruntimehin, Babatunde Agiri and T. G. O. Gbadamosi (whose PhD thesis he also supervised). To both the older and younger generations, Ajayi imparted not only historiographical skills but also life skills. He epitomized the humane touch that should underline the mentor or teacher's interaction with students. He was kind and generous with access to his library and his increasingly limited time, and was always concerned about the welfare of his protégés.

Professor Ajayi's administrative and intellectual strides have been acknowledged through various awards locally and internationally. His international awards included an LLD degree (*honoris causa*), University of Leicester, 1975; DLitt (*honoris causa*), University of Birmingham, 1984; Distinguished Africanist Award from the African Studies Association, North America, 1993; Honorary Fellow at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), 1994; and the UNESCO Avicenna Silver Medal for Outstanding Contribution to the General History of Africa, 1999. Locally, he was made a Founding Fellow of the Historical Society of Nigeria in 1980; decorated with the Nigerian National Merit Award in 1986; he was awarded the University of Lagos's Twenty-fifth Anniversary Gold Medal in 1987 for his contribution to the development of the university; and he received the Nigerian Centenary Award in March 2014 from the Federal Government of Nigeria.

Professor J. F. Ade Ajayi was given a befitting burial in his hometown, Ikole-Ekiti, on 19 September 2014. His corpse was welcomed with the traditional gun salute. An illustrious son had come home to rest with his ancestors after a distinguished career. He is survived by his wife, Chief (Mrs) Christie Ajayi, several children and grandchildren. He was an exemplar, as an associate noted in the 233-page *Book of Tributes* distributed during his funeral, 'of the breadth of scholarship and the depth of intellect that every historian aspires to achieve. He was the historian's historian.'<sup>3</sup> May his hard work and legacy endure.

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<sup>3</sup>A *Book of Tributes for Emeritus Professor Jacob Festus Ade Ajayi*. Lagos and Ibadan: University of Lagos Press and Jadeas Trust, 2014.