

The Contribution of the University of Ibadan to the Spread  
of the Study and Teaching of African History within Africa

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The role of the new universities of Black Africa in the growth and development of African nations has as yet received nothing like the attention it deserves. In the crucial period of the transition from colonial rule to independence these universities were responsible for training a very high proportion of the entire administrative, professional, scientific, pedagogical and specialist elites of the nascent nations. More perhaps than anywhere else the ruling class in most anglophone African countries is a class of university graduates. The way that the universities have shaped and developed the attitudes, skills and values of the dominant elites has thus exercised a very important influence on the pattern of post-independence development.

The impact of the universities was not, however, confined to the emerging graduate elite. The university staff in many subject areas played a leading role in the revision of school syllabuses while as graduates from the universities went back to the schools as teachers they took with them to the classrooms the intellectual interests, approaches and values they had acquired in their degree studies. Not only have the ruling cadres of these nations been moulded by the universities, but the intellectual background interests and values of virtually the entire literate sections of their populations have been very significantly shaped by them also. When one bears in mind that this widespread influence over the life of a whole nation was sometimes exercised by a single university, one becomes aware of the very great power that was entrusted to the small, mainly expatriate academic staffs of these institutions.

It is with a view to illustrating the importance of this subject rather than as an attempt at a definitive study of any aspect of it that I offer this brief account based mainly on personal reminiscence of the role of the University of Ibadan in fostering the study and teaching of African history.

As a College of the University of London under the special relationship system, the syllabuses taught at Ibadan had to be approved by London University and the emphasis in history was very definitely on British and European History. It was the appointment of Kenneth Dike to the headship of the Department in Ibadan in 1954 that marked the beginning of significant change in this regard. One of the first Nigerian scholars to head a department in the University College he came to the task fresh from the completion of a PhD in which he had demonstrated the important role which Africans had played as actors in the history of British relations with the Niger Delta area.

Published in 1956 as Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1956) this was a pioneer work in the task that Terence Ranger was later to call the rediscovery of African initiative. In 1954, however, the furthest that London University was prepared to go was to permit the teaching of a course entitled European Activities in Africa. Within the Department itself there were sincerely held differences of opinion as to whether the attempt to teach the history of African peoples themselves was possible or intellectually desirable. It was argued on the one hand that concentration on European activities made sense as they had been the main dynamic force in Africa since the 19th Century and on the other that as our main task was the intellectual training of our students, it was better to concentrate on British and European History where the range of literature available facilitated the development of critical judgement. Warm though these arguments often were, a

consensus reasonably favourable towards the introduction of courses in the study of African history had developed in the Department by 1956 when Professor Dike was able to tell us that London had agreed to the inclusion of courses in African history in the Honours and General Degree syllabuses. Thereafter, the teaching of the subject was progressively strengthened by the recruitment of a number of Nigerian scholars, the late Joseph Anene, Jacob Ajayi and Ade Aderebigbe. In 1955 Christopher Ifemesia, the first of our own students to go to Britain for a PhD, was undertaking initial research in Nigeria. When he returned a few years later he was the first of our own products to join the academic staff of the Department. As the teaching of African history developed, we began to produce a small trickle of outstanding students with an interest in the field who completed PhD studies abroad and then returned to further strengthen the Department. Emmanuel Ayandele and Tekena Tamuno, both of whom have published widely in the field of Nigerian history and have made a substantial impact on Nigerian university education as Vice-Chancellors as well as Professors of History, were among these.

While Kenneth Dike was working on the history of the Niger Delta his contemporary, Saburi Biobaku, was preparing his thesis on the statecraft of the Egba. Published by the Clarendon Press in 1957, The Egba and their Neighbours shared with Dike's book the concern to show Africans as creative agents of their own history. While Dike became Head of the History Department, Biobaku became Registrar. Both of them launched substantial and, for those days, lavishly funded research projects. Neither Dike's Benin Scheme nor Biobaku's Yoruba Historical Research Scheme entirely fulfilled the hopes of their initiators. Both did lead, however, to a good deal of publication and substantial increase in our knowledge of the societies with which they were

concerned. The Benin Scheme gave rise to the work of Dark on Benin Art, Ryder on Benin in the Portuguese period, and Bradbury on the development of the political institutions of the Kingdom. It also made possible extensive archaeological work on the site of the city. The Yoruba Historical Research Scheme provided the basis for the numerous publications of Morton-Williams, Peter Lloyd and Akinjogbin. In addition to his work as Head of Department and Director of the Benin Scheme, Professor Dike also played a crucial role in setting up the National Archives. Soon after Nigeria became an independent nation in 1960 it was decided that Ibadan should sever its special relationship with London and assume the status of an independent university. The question then was whether we would continue to work within the framework of the London General and Honours Degree structure or work out a system of our own specifically designed for Nigeria's educational needs. The History Department initiated the fight for a new degree structure and the whole university gave itself up to this great debate. The History Department held weekly meetings for the whole of one academic year at which our views on the structure as a whole and the programme of history courses within it were worked out.

Within the new system African history was made the central core of our history teaching replacing the predominance of British and European History which had remained characteristic of the London degree system even after African history courses had been introduced. Within the new system, moreover, a study of Nigerian history with documents became the centrepiece of the final year of the degree. Another important feature of the new system was that on Jacob Ajayi's proposal we wrote a provision into the degree regulations that anyone seeking to major in History must take at least two years of either French or Arabic. This had a dramatic effect on language studies. Something like two-thirds

of the Arts entry each year was anxious to keep the option of majoring in History open. Within a year or two we had the great majority of Arts students taking French. Apart from the numerous other significant consequences of this we succeeded in encouraging the development of a number of Nigerian scholars who have undertaken research into aspects of the history of Francophone Africa and who constitute an important fraction of the very small number of African scholars capable of straddling the Anglophone-Francophone divide. Though the numbers opting for Arabic to fulfill their language requirement were always very much smaller, Ibadan did succeed in training some Arabist African historians who have undertaken research of distinction using Arabic source material.

With the introduction of the new degree system Ibadan launched its own Masters and PhD programmes and the History Department soon had a substantial body of post-graduate students and a lively research seminar modelled on the pattern of those held in London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Through this the History Department not only trained most of its own new staff, but also the majority of the history staff of the new universities of Lagos, Ife, and Ahmadu Bello in Zaria. The History Department in the University of Nigeria Nsukka was the only one in which the influence of scholars who had worked or trained at the University of Ibadan did not quickly become preponderant. The Ibo retreat from the West in the run up to Biafran secession, however, established it firmly there also. When London University finally authorized the introduction of courses on African history in 1956, the question of suitable books became urgent. On Professor Dike's proposal the Department agreed on a joint project to produce a substantial textbook covering the history of the continent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The project was held up by disagreement

over fundamental issues of interpretation between some of the collaborators as well as by preoccupation with other projects. In the end it fell by the wayside, but in the course of one of the meetings we held with Longmans representatives over the project, I proposed that while the textbook was delayed Longmans might like to publish a series of individual works as an Ibadan History Series. The idea was enthusiastically accepted and the Series subsequently provided the vehicle for a substantial list of publications most concerned with Nigerian history, but others ranging over South Africa, the Belgian Congo (Zaire) and Malagasy.

Apart from teaching and research, one of the main activities of the History Department at Ibadan was its involvement in establishing and sustaining a National Historical Society. It was inaugurated at a colourful conference in December 1955. The modern day scholars mingled with chiefs and traditional historians. The Galadima of Bida clad in turban and flowing white robes had brought a very old man with him to display as the last surviving feudal warrior. Mallam Lawal, the scribe of Agaie, perfectly represented the traditional Islamic scholarly class of the North in his dress and deportment.

Thereafter, regular annual conferences were held and to maintain the national character of the association, the venue was changed each year to cover the three regions and the federal capital. Attempts were made with some success to build up branch organisations in the main regional centres, but these always depended very heavily on the enthusiasm of one or two individuals. They would thus flourish briefly then die down or collapse altogether when these driving personalities were transferred elsewhere.

From 1956 the Historical Society of Nigeria published an annual journal which soon became an important vehicle for the publication

of scholarly research in African (mainly Nigerian) history and archaeology. Attempts were made to provide opportunities in its pages for work by amateur or traditional historians, but the pressures of academic scholarship turned it into an increasingly orthodox learned journal. As such, however, it was, in company with the Ghana and Togoland Historical Journal, a pioneer in the publication of historical research within Anglo-phone Black Africa. In addition to the Journal, the Society published a quarterly bulletin with news of the latest research in African history and a running bibliography of recent publications. Through its conferences, branch meetings and publications the Society helped to increase and sustain interest in Nigerian and African history generally. School teachers were, of course, particularly important in this regard and a great deal of the Society's efforts were directed towards encouraging and helping them to come to grips with African history. As expatriate teachers began to give way to Nigerians (very largely Ibadan students), the Society continued to play an important part in sustaining their morale and intellectual enthusiasm. Probably the most vital role of the Society, however, was to act as the vehicle for a campaign aimed at the transformation of secondary school history syllabuses by the introduction of courses on African history.

By the early fifties the Cambridge University Examinations Syndicate, with the support of the West African Examinations Council, had introduced a new option in addition to British and European History and the History of the British Empire and Commonwealth. This was entitled 'The Development of Tropical Africa'. This encouraging title was somewhat belied by the actual content of the syllabus, however. It was very complex with a number of sections which could be taken as alternatives and this allowed a teacher to confine himself very largely to the study of European history and the British Constitution.

The attack on this travesty of a course in African history and the campaign for genuine African history syllabuses was launched by Charles (now Abdullahi) Smith at the Conference of the Nigerian Historical Society in December 1956 which was devoted to the theme of history teaching in Nigerian secondary schools. In his address to the Conference, Charles made an eloquent plea for the radical revision of the new syllabus and the introduction of courses aimed at understanding the development of African societies themselves rather than of the external influences operating on them. Discussions at the Conference later showed that teachers were much divided over the issue, many fearing to launch on this new untried area of study in the absence of suitable textbooks. The discussions did, however, generate something of a consensus in favour of a move towards the introduction of syllabuses in African history. In the aftermath of this Conference, the Historical Society gained the right to be represented on the Nigerian section of the West African Examinations Council's History Syllabus Panel. Over the next few years further discussions took place within the Society's governing committee. Definite proposals were developed for the introduction of two alternative African history papers into the school certificate syllabus. These were a paper on Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries and a paper on West Africa since about 1000 A.D. Armed with these proposals I joined two Nigerian school teachers, Mr Somoye and Mr Basorun and Godfrey Brown of the Education Department at Ibadan to constitute the Nigerian delegation to a meeting of the entire History Panel of the West African Examinations Council at Accra in 1963. We were accommodated in the Black Star Hotel and the night before the Conference opened, Mr Somoye, Mr Basorun and I argued until nearly midnight trying to persuade Godfrey to abandon his continuing support for the



Development of Tropical Africa syllabus and make the Nigerian Historical Society's proposals the unanimous stand of the Nigerian delegation. After this long tussle within our delegation we approached the Conference with some trepidation. We need not have worried. Once the meeting began it was clear that our views were enthusiastically shared by Adu Boahen and Mr Buah of the Ghana delegation. The Conference rapidly developed an overwhelming common will and was pervaded by a tense excitement born of a sense of the historic importance of what we were doing. The existing O-level history syllabuses were almost completely scrapped. The Tropical Africa paper and the British Empire and Commonwealth paper were abandoned altogether. In their place the two alternative African history papers were adopted and a paper on Modern European History, including Britain, was projected. The following year another Conference tidied up the details and made changes in the A-level programme also. Though the new papers were launched right away, schools had the option of continuing to teach the existing syllabus for a further two years. In that time it was desperately urgent to provide teaching materials. The History Department at Ibadan, in conjunction with the Institute of Education and assisted by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation, organized an international African History Workshop. The papers prescribed at this Workshop, after being rewritten in the light of discussion at the Conference, formed the core material for two books intended primarily for teachers and each covering one of the two African history syllabuses. A Thousand Years of West African History was edited by Jacob Ajayi and Ian Espie; Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries by Joseph Anene and Godfrey Brown. For all their very obvious limitations, these books did provide some basis for the teaching of the new courses. Published by Nelsons, they had a tremendous sale for many, indeed too many, years.

Sections from them have also been republished in a book of readings in the United States.

Teachers' books were not enough, however. Textbooks written at a level that O-level pupils in West Africa could hope to understand were desperately needed. Publishers were now anxious to find authors who would be willing to help them meet the demand. After discussions within the Department and between members of the Department and representatives of Longmans, a series of textbooks entitled 'The Growth of African Civilisation' was planned. Members of the Ibadan Department wrote the two volumes covering the syllabus on Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. The two West African History volumes involved cooperation between historians in Ibadan and Ghana and for the first volume, Basil Davidson as well. The series was later extended to cover East and Central African History, thus providing a basis for the extension of the revolution in history syllabuses beyond West Africa. Though they now have many competitors, the books in this series (now being re-edited and brought up to date) still sell in many thousands each year. Though regarding the production of these textbooks as the most basic essential, some members of the History Department still felt that this was not enough. We believed that a relatively popular and easily read journal of African History presenting the latest interpretations, but in simple language and without an elaborate apparatus criticus, something like 'History Today', was needed. We thought of the idea of publishing it as a second journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria.

Thus, and with a very great deal of help and financial support from Longmans, the journal 'Tarikh' was born and for a number of years played an important role in enabling teachers of African History in the schools to keep up with new developments.

Soon after these projects were launched, the expansion of the Ibadan History Department's influence on the teaching of African history in Africa was further extended by my own appointment to the Foundation Chair of History in the University of Zambia and Bertin Webster's appointment to the Chair in Makerere. The outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War and the dispersal of Ibadan trained Ibo scholars, moreover, spread that influence still further afield, notably to several universities in the United States.

The influence of the Ibadan History Department on the spread of the study and teaching of African History in Nigeria, West Africa and Africa at large has thus been very considerable. It is difficult to see how any account of the development of political consciousness and attitudes in Anglophone West Africa, and to a lesser extent East and Central Africa, can be complete without taking the influence of the teaching and writings of members of the Department and the school syllabuses they prepared into account. In general, the Ibadan approach could be classified as Africanist, concerned with the study of African societies for their own sake and with African political activity in the colonial period. A glance at the titles in the Ibadan History Series<sup>1</sup> illustrates this very clearly. The approach is thus one that radicals could well, and perhaps rightly, stigmatise as bourgeois nationalist, though there was a decided leaning towards the ideals of wider political unity within Africa as well. Certainly there was little hint of the more recent radical neo-Marxist approaches and their concern for economic and class issues. Radical in its time, much of the work of the Ibadan History Department is inevitably now becoming conservative and out of date and needs to be transcended by new interpretations and analyses.

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1. Titles of the Ibadan History Series up to 1977 include:

Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891  
by J.F.A. Ajayi

The Zulu Aftermath  
by J.D. Omer-Cooper

The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914  
by E.A. Ayandele

The Sokoto Caliphate  
by Murray Last

Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897  
by A.F.C. Ryder

Niger Delta Rivalry  
by Obaro Ikime

The International Boundaries of Nigeria  
by J.C. Anene

Revolution and Power Politics in Yorubaland 1840-1883  
by S.A. Akintoye

Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria 1804-1906  
by R.A. Adeleye

The Segu Tukulor Empire  
by B.O. Oloruntimehin

The Warrant Chiefs  
by A.E. Afigbo

The New Oyo Empire  
by J.A. Atanda

The Evolution of the Nigerian State  
by T.N. Tamuno

The Malagasy and the Europeans  
by P.M. Mutibwa

Western Yorubaland under European Rule 1889-1945  
by A.I. Asiwaju

The Judicial System in Southern Nigeria 1854-1954  
by Omoniyi Adewoye

These are, of course, only a fraction of the total publications of Ibadan scholars.