

J. F. ADE AJAYI: A MEMORIAL



In contrast to Funke Adeboye's formal obituary, what I offer here are some memorial reflections on Jacob Ajayi's life and work, starting from his signal contribution to the International African Institute. This is to start in the middle, but it makes sense to begin from the setting in which (being then newly appointed as editor of *Africa*) I first met him – although, of course, I had known of him through his writings and his reputation well before that. Ajayi became Chairman of the Council of the IAI – a post once occupied by Lord Lugard – in 1975. Daryll Forde had retired from his long directorship a year or so before, and there ensued a flurry of new initiatives under his successor. The Chairman's role had for years been routine and minimal – in fact, involving little more than to chair the Council's annual meeting, whose main business was to receive and discuss the Director's report on the past year's activities and plans for the next. Rarely was there anything that was controversial or called for any decisive initiative. But in 1979–80 this dramatically changed, as it became clear that the Institute's affairs had been very badly mismanaged, and that bankruptcy loomed. Severe corrective measures were needed: staff dismissed, projects abandoned, cheaper accommodation found. The Director resigned and his successor lasted less than a year, fearing he might be held personally liable for the Institute's debts. Ajayi doubly saved the Institute, first by securing a substantial grant from Oyo State of Nigeria, which plugged the financial black hole, and then by steadying the governance of the Institute through several very difficult years: in fact, he worked with three successive directors.

Ajayi was one of the best committee chairmen I have known. His conduct of business was masterly: he always kept a firm grip on the essential issues without seeming to dominate the discussion, letting others have their say until he judged that all had been said that needed to be said, and bringing things to a clear and firm resolution. What made him so effective was less his manner – which was

notably mild and reticent, never wasting his words or raising his voice – than the sense of personal integrity and profound commitment to academic and scholarly values which he projected. The foundation of all his work, whether as a scholar or an academic administrator, was the rectitude of his judgement.

As a historian this showed in the calm, exact and authoritative way he analysed the complex situations and mixed motives of his subjects. It is instructive here to contrast the style of his classic monograph *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841–1891* (1965) with E. A. Ayandele's *Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842–1914* (1966), which followed so closely upon it. From their titles, these might seem to overlap considerably, but as K. Onwuka Dike – the doyen of Nigerian historians as well as the Vice Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, where both men taught – rightly observed, they were 'manifestly distinct' in theme, emphasis and perspective – and in fact they fully complement one another in substance, yet the tone is very different. Ajayi's is measured and judicious, while Ayandele's is rhetorical and advocacy; and while Ayandele liked to have heroes and villains, Ajayi followed the Tacitean aim of writing *sine ira et studio*, even when it was clear where his values lay. What strikes me as most telling is the even-handedness of his treatment of the two main figures in *Christian Missions*, namely Bishop Crowther – who surely was Ajayi's hero – and his main antagonist in the mission politics of the day, the Reverend Henry Townsend.

Over the years, I came to appreciate more the stability of the interlocking moral attachments that underpinned Ajayi's life: loyalty to family and community; a very Yoruba sense that the wisdom of the past can serve as a resource for progress and enlightenment; a view of historical scholarship as both a good in itself and as making a vital contribution to national development; and faith in the redemptive power of the Christian religion. To understand the man in the round, we need to go back to his origins in Ikole-Ekiti: *omọ adię l'o ndi akukọ* ('It is the chick that becomes the cockerel').

Ekiti is the most beautiful part of Yorubaland, a region of forested hills about 200 miles north-east of Lagos. Mytho-historically it was a land of sixteen small kingdoms, which engendered fierce local loyalties and often quarrelled with one another. In the mid-nineteenth century their local militias were initially no match for the Ibadan war machine, and many of their people were enslaved; yet they eventually combined – as *Ekitiparapo*, 'Ekiti together' – and fought Ibadan to a standstill. The Ekiti are sometimes seen as *ara oke* ('upcountry people'), a condescending term that denotes uncouth rusticity – at least in the eyes of savvy Lagosians and the people of the developed coastal region – but it also evokes an image of honesty and hard work. The transforming colonial nexus of motorable roads, effective administration, cash crops, schools and Christian conversion took time to fan out from Lagos, not impacting strongly on Ekiti till the 1920s. There soon followed the cultural upheaval of the Aladura revival, which burst upon Ekiti in 1930–31. No other part of Yorubaland was as deeply affected by it: it swept away many old pieties and the conviction spread that, remote and disadvantaged as the Ekiti were, they might seize the opportunities offered by mission education and so 'make their country good'.

Jacob Ajayi was born on the cusp of these developments in 1929. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he was not a first-generation Christian, but the first son of one of the most prominent personalities in Ikole. His father, Ezekiel Adeniji Ajayi,

was a pioneer Christian whom everyone knew as *Akowe Oba* ('The King's Secretary') or as 'Postmaster'. The young Jacob was nicknamed *Arondo* ('Titch') for being so small, and he was only five when he began at St Paul's CMS primary school, which was very young indeed in those days. From early on he showed a singular degree of inner-directed self-possession, almost of personal destiny, as if he knew just where he wanted to go. After transferring at eleven from St Paul's to Ado-Ekiti Central School (yet to become, as Christ's School, one of Nigeria's best secondary schools), he spent only a year there before asking to take the entrance exam to Igbobi College, a prestigious joint Anglican/Methodist secondary school in Lagos. This was entirely on his own initiative, yet he was not yet into his teens and in later years was unable to give a full rationale for his request, so that it seems like an intervention of providence. But to Igbobi he went, and the line of his progress thereafter lay straight and clear – he was virtually always the youngest in his cohort, as well as top of his class – through Yaba Higher College, the University Colleges of Ibadan and Leicester, the University of London, and finally back to Ibadan to a lectureship in history in 1958.

Ajayi's first spell at Ibadan (1958–72) was in every way extremely productive. The university (as it became fully in 1962) was an exhilarating place, bright with hope and promise as the first wave of Nigerian scholars took over the reins of leadership from expatriates in one discipline after another, imbued with a strong sense of the special role of the university in national development. As Nigeria slid towards its first major political crisis during the years 1963–66, with the Western Region (Yorubaland) the main cockpit of conflict, the university felt like an oasis of serene high-mindedness, embodying the possibility of the nation rising above corruption and sectional strife. History was the queen of the humanities, with a special role in healing the rupture produced by colonialism through reconnecting the African past to the future that modern Africans aspired to. So Ajayi was very soon recognized as a pivotal figure, quickly rising to a professorship in 1963 and the first Nigerian to be Dean of the Faculty of Arts. Other major figures, such as J. C. Anene and E. A. Ayandele, added strength to the enterprise – not without rivalry with Ajayi, although it was a creative tension – but Ajayi was unquestionably the dynamic force behind what came to be seen as one of the university's high points, the 'Ibadan School of History'.

It is easy now to forget the scale of the professional task that Africa's pioneer historians saw lying before them. H. R. Trevor-Roper's insulting jibe about African history – that so far there was only the history of Europeans in Africa – in a BBC broadcast lecture in 1964 deeply stung historians of Africa, and put them on their collective mettle to show that it was unjustified. Of Ajayi's many contributions here, the main one was surely his editorship, with Michael Crowder, of the seminal two-volume *History of West Africa* (1971 and 1974, with later editions), which presented a series of magisterial chapters from the best international scholars covering the region's history from prehistoric times to post-independence. Crowder was a close personal friend – to the Ajayi children he was 'Uncle Michael' – and they made a perfect partnership, with Ajayi the intellectual driver of the project, ably backed by Crowder's skills as an organizer and editor. The span of the book made it possible to start thinking, as Ajayi was to put it, of the colonial period as but 'an episode in African history'.

Ajayi's professional activities went alongside a busy family and social life. While in London he had married Christie Aduke Martins, whose outgoing nature

complemented his own more reticent disposition. Together they raised a lively family of five children – Yetunde, who was born in London, then a son (Niyi) and three more girls (Funlayo, Titilola and Bisola). The Ajayis kept a most hospitable house, had a very wide circle of friends of all backgrounds, and to this day are remembered for the wonderful parties they gave in those early days in Ibadan. Latterly, they held ‘Sing for your Supper’ parties every Christmas Eve, bringing family and friends together to sing carols. Ajayi was very strongly committed to the ideal of the university as a self-regulating community, and when he later went to Lagos as Vice Chancellor, he kept open house at his official residence for all members and employees of the university on New Year’s Day. He was (in the biblical sense) ‘no respecter of persons’ and, when ethnic tensions surfaced even on the Ibadan campus around the time of the Civil War, was sometimes absurdly criticized for being too friendly with expatriates and Igbos.

His years at Unilag (1972–78) saw him at the height of his powers and coincided with the first great surge of Nigeria’s oil revenues, so there were the resources to do great things. The university had had a chequered early history and was badly in need of a radical overhaul, and this Ajayi had the vision and the capacity to give it. He will be remembered as its epochal Vice Chancellor, as Dike was at Ibadan or his contemporary Oluwasanmi at Ife. The manner of his departure was as characteristic of the man as of the times. A wave of student protest at a government decision to introduce fees led to a student being shot at the campus gates when police arrived to break up a demonstration. The military government (then headed by General Obasanjo) was displeased at the university’s participation in the student’s funeral. As the crisis spread to other universities, the government set up a commission of inquiry, which was clearly aimed at curtailing university autonomy. It was for speaking out against this policy that Ajayi was dismissed from the vice-chancellorship: a measure taken with deliberate spite when he was away giving a keynote lecture at the Association of Commonwealth Universities in Vancouver.

After the storms and responsibilities of the years at Lagos, Ajayi returned to Ibadan. He was still only forty-nine, as his career entered its third and longest phase. He now had an international reputation, and increasingly he was drawn into engagements beyond Nigeria, receiving many honours and invitations, serving on all sorts of governing bodies at home and abroad, and also finding himself extensively consulted as a wise elder in diverse arenas within Nigeria. But he also returned to his primary vocation as a historian, contributing to the work of the History Department at Ibadan, particularly by supervising research students. In 1989 he brought his long involvement with the UNESCO *General History of Africa* to a climax with the publication of its Volume VI, which he had inspired and edited, on the nineteenth century up to the 1880s. It has to be a matter of enormous regret that he never wrote the full-scale biography of Bishop Crowther that many hoped to see from him.

He was greatly saddened that during the 1980s the Nigerian universities went into such a decline, and particularly the place of history within them. A poignant address he gave in 2004, ‘When salt has lost its saltiness’, reflects on this within the framework of his own revived religious faith. Despite Ajayi’s strong Christian upbringing – his mother had been a devout member of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) – in his early adulthood his faith became rather nominal, verging towards agnosticism; but in later life he followed other members of his family

to become a born-again Christian, and in 1996 he began a men's Bible study fellowship which met at his house in Bodija. It is the business of a historian to reflect upon the balance of continuity and change within the flow of time, and there are short pieces on these themes in the little book of his addresses to the fellowship compiled by his friends Segun Oke and Akin Thomas.¹ He acquired serenity in accepting change, even when it was not for the better. But his basic disposition was always to stress the continuities, rather than the ruptures, in history, and to enable others to see them and gain strength from them. As a good African nationalist, he believed that Africa's development would be most secure when it was grounded in the best of its own traditions.

Agba ko si, ilu baje; bale ile ku, ile di ahoro.

(Where there are no elders, the town is spoiled; when the head of the house dies, the house becomes deserted.)

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¹Segun Oke and Akin Thomas (eds) *Jacob Speaks: a selection of Bible study papers delivered by Emeritus Professor J. F. Ade Ajayi*. Ibadan: Jadeas Trust, 2014. For the record, let it be noted that Chapter 18 of this book cannot have been delivered by Ajayi, since it contains autobiographical details that do not apply to him.