

An important collection of essays which elucidate our past as a country through the intensive lens focused on an important academic player of our recent past

# J. F. ADE AJAYI

## HIS LIFE AND CAREER



FOREWORD BY  
General Yakubu Gowon, GCFR

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### Mentoring, Teaching and Supervision

Kunle Lawal & Olufunke Adeboye

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If there was anything about Professor Jacob Festus Adeniyi Ajayi that ran through his entire career from about the early years of Nigeria's independence through the twilight of the century and into the new millennium, it was the fact that he never had any respite or low tide period. This was because as soon as he was appointed a Professor of History by the University of Ibadan authorities, his incredible genius sprouted, probably, beyond his own imagination at that time. While the aspect of his career in the incipient days have been dealt with already in this compendium, this chapter takes a look at some major landmarks and epochs in Ade Ajayi's sterling and chequered academic life in the years after his return from the highly successful tour of duty as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lagos. As would be seen in the sequel, the many great strides that Ade Ajayi was able to make after his tenure as chief executive of the University of Lagos had their foundations laid during the Unilag days.

After his national assignment as University of Lagos Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ade Ajayi returned to his first love, the



University of Ibadan where he continued to do what he knew how to do best. For the next decade, Professor Ajayi, in spite of his many extra-curricular activities, still had time to supervise and mentor many historians. This should not be surprising as whether as a freshly minted professor at the University of Ibadan in the early 1960s or during the hectic days as Vice-Chancellor at the University of Lagos in the 1970s, Ade Ajayi returned a career of service to his beloved discipline (history) and conscious service to his fellow men and humanity.

The career of Professor Ade Ajayi was impressive by all standards. Soon after his return to the University of Ibadan, he was appointed the Pro-Chancellor and Chairman of the Governing Council of the Ondo State University where he was able to bring his experience as a former Vice-Chancellor and topmost university administrator to bear on the conduct of the business of that institution. Before then, Ade Ajayi had been appointed a member of the Governing Council of the Universities of Cape Coast and Lesotho. Similarly, he was appointed a member of the Governing Council of the United Nations University which he was to chair for two years (1975-1977) as Pro-Chancellor. In all of these high academic and administrative positions, Ade Ajayi maintained the dignity and integrity which informed his appointment in the first place. No hint of controversy was heard about his tenure in these positions. Rather, he appeared to have used these positions to affect, positively, the career of some of his junior colleagues. For instance, it was as Chairman of the Governing Council of Ondo State University that he caused the appointment of one of his erstwhile colleagues at the University of Ibadan to a full chair by the university.<sup>1</sup>

The culture of giving out his books on loan to the department as well as his agreeing to turn his private library into a trust library for the department – these twin developments did increase the stature of the erudite and selfless professor of history. In the first place, he taught (with Dr Gabriel Akindele Akinola) the final year course of African Historiography (HIS 401) and HIS 701 which was “The Problem of Methods and Theories in History) – a post graduate level course. These two courses were the dreaded courses with which students

usually had problems. The department not only acknowledged this kind gesture but immensely thanked Professor Ade Ajayi for "continually identifying with our needs and aspirations".<sup>2</sup>

### **Appointment as Emeritus Professor**

It is on record that even as a retired Emeritus Professor, Ade Ajayi willingly gave his time to "rescue" the Department of History during an impending visit by the National Universities Commission (NUC) Accreditation Panel in 2002. Of course one may want to argue that what Professor Ade Ajayi did was in line with the expectations of an Emeritus Professor. Yet, it should be put on record that he gave unstintingly of his time. He not only accepted but in fact, did so in the name of some of his own colleagues. His words are of high relevance in this regard:

Please explain to the NUC team that all the senior historians in Ibadan have volunteered to give all the necessary post-graduate lectures free of charge so that none can complain of inadequacy of staff in the History Department.<sup>3</sup>

This kind gesture was promptly acknowledged by the Vice-Chancellor of the institution himself, Professor Ayodele Falase, with words of significance: "I cannot thank you enough for your selfless service to the development of the University in general and the Department of History in particular."<sup>4</sup>

One of the greatest things about Professor Jacob Adeniyi Ajayi's career as a teacher and researcher is that he became more prolific and undoubtedly known after he had been appointed a Professor of History by the University of Ibadan. Indeed, this view is widely accepted as being appropriate as Professor Obaro Ikime noted in his nomination of Professor Ade Ajayi for the prestigious position of an Emeritus Professor:

Perhaps one of the most outstanding things about Professor Ajayi is that it is as Professor that he has produced most of his published works.



This is to say that he has maintained a steady record of productivity since 1963 as his curriculum vitae shows. His publications are both outstanding and numerous. He is an acclaimed scholar worldwide, who has brought honour to both this University and the Nation.<sup>5</sup>

However, this nomination came as a direct aftermath of Professor Michael Omolewa's suggestion to Professor Obaro Ikime to consider nominating Ade Ajayi for appointment as Emeritus Professor. Omolewa's consideration for his suggestion was hinged, principally, on the fact that Professor Ajayi was "a pride of the Department" who has had a distinguished career as a teacher of teachers in the University of Ibadan since 1958.<sup>6</sup> Professor Jacob Festus Adeniyi Ajayi was, thus, appointed Emeritus Professor on the 22nd of June, 1990.<sup>7</sup>

The appointment, being a well deserved one, deserves to be properly located within the context of what Professor Ajayi had come to represent within the Nigerian academia as well as without, i.e. among the pioneer elite who took over the mantle of leadership of the historical profession in Africa and among the committee of World Historians where he carved a niche for himself as a forward-looking, consistent scholar who was always ready to assist his upcoming colleagues in the business of teaching and research. While this appointment as Emeritus can be rightly seen as the necessary icing on the cake, the trajectory of Professor Ajayi's post-Unilag's career after his return to the Ibadan School of History in 1979 would reveal his commitment to the furtherance of the brand for which he, and a few others, have laboured so tirelessly from the late 1950s through the 1960s and early 1970s to create.

It should be recalled that at the valedictory lecture which Professor Ade Ajayi delivered at the Trenchard Hall in 1989, he made what, with the benefit of hindsight and history, could be regarded as a prophetic statement. In this lecture which was as typical and vintage Ade Ajayi, he openly declared that those who were expecting to read his academic obituary had a long wait to do as he had just started.<sup>8</sup> True to his words, Ade Ajayi used the decade of the 1990s to offer

mentoring to a number of scholars as either supervisor or teacher of the dreaded course on historiography at the post-graduate level – the problems of theories and methods in history. It is interesting to note that this was the decade that Ade Ajayi was able to produce his largest number of doctoral candidates.

### **Ade Ajayi as an Academic Mentor**

Professor Ade Ajayi has always been a silent giver, a kind hearted and public-spirited person. Even while he was still in active service, Ade Ajayi used to give a substantial part of his remuneration as charity to many indigent students.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting that he did this, mostly, *incognito*, believing as the true Christian that he always has been, that his right hand should not know what his left hand gives. However, this pales into insignificance when the acts of mentoring which Professor Ade Ajayi engaged in as he matured into a “grand master” of the historical profession in Africa in the 1980s and the 1990s. As Kunle Lawal testifies, “I can well remember that Professor Ade Ajayi gave of his time, unstintingly, in London in 1988 during his doctoral research fieldwork in the United Kingdom. I was then attached to St Antony’s College, Oxford and the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) for an eighteen-month period as a student of erudite Professor Kirk-Greene and Richard Rathbone. The interesting thing about this experience was that in spite of the eminent qualifications of these two outstanding scholars on the transfer of power processes in Africa, Professor Ade Ajayi still found time out of his very tight and busy schedule as President of International African Institute to discuss my research with me. He gave of his time and resources so freely that the thesis that issued forth from the research benefitted immensely, from the deep insight which this erudite professor brought into my study. It was almost one year later that I discovered to my great pleasure that Professor Ade Ajayi and Professor Edho Ekoko had just, then, finished a seminal essay on “The Transfer of Power in Nigeria: Its Origins and Consequences”<sup>10</sup>, the same theme that I was working on. The joy of working on this theme, for me, was that I was the first scholar to have



access to the then newly declassified records of the British Colonial Office, Britain's major agency for the management of the African colonies in the twilight of British rule.

Subsequently, Professor Ade Ajayi gave me a reference to the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, when there was a job opening. Again, it is instructive that I was still in the United Kingdom as an ABD<sup>11</sup> when I wrote to him. He wrote a reference letter for me and informed me he was writing to let me know that he had done the needful. On my return to Nigeria, Professor Ade Ajayi kept an interest in my career and for close to twenty years, was the number one referee on my resume. Another major element of this rather unforgettable mentoring relationship was the role played by Professor Ade Ajayi in getting me a place on the highly competitive J. William Fulbright Senior Visiting Research Fellowship just under two years after the successful defence of my doctoral dissertation. In effect, I turned out to be the youngest African Senior Fulbright Research Scholar attached to the Office of Scholarly Programs of the reputable United States Library of Congress where I was able to turn out a study on the "United States Attitude towards the Decolonisation Process in Nigeria, 1945-1960". Professor Ade Ajayi read a considerable part of the draft of that study."

### **Ade Ajayi: Teacher Par Excellence**

Professor Ade Ajayi loved teaching and he took time to break down the most complex issues to his students. This author encountered him in the final year of her B.A. programme in the Department of History, University of Ibadan.<sup>12</sup> As noted earlier, two of the most dreaded courses in the department then were African Historiography, a 400 Level (fourth year) undergraduate course and Problems of Theories and Methods of History, a 700 Level graduate course (in the M.A. class). Because of the abstract nature of the philosophical and methodological issues raised in both courses, successive generations of students dreaded not only the courses but also those who taught them. Professor Ade Ajayi came to teach us African Historiography a couple of years before his retirement. By then he had had a

very distinguished career as a “first generation” African historian, university administrator (he had been Vice-Chancellor at Lagos) and an accomplished author. We had also read some of his books, especially the *History of West Africa, Volume I and II*, which he co-edited with Michael Crowder. Seeing Professor Ade Ajayi in front of our class then elicited mixed emotions from us. First, we were awestruck. We were simply intimidated by his profile, and for the first few classes all we could say was “So, this is the Ade Ajayi we have heard so much about?” He had never taught my class before then and had only just returned from a leave of absence or so. Second, we were impressed with his vast knowledge of the discipline. He taught us with authority, as if he was a part of the events he discussed. He also took time to explain those vague historiographical issues to us. He exposed to us a lot of the literature on the African past and always came to class with excerpts from the works of authors we never knew existed – Jan Huizinga, Akiga Sai, Gann and Duignan, etc. He made us discuss their thoughts in order to get a feel of the idea of history as articulated in various climes.

We always put on our best behaviour in his class and none of us would have even contemplated any mischief. He came to class in what we came to know as his signature native wear (*buba* and *sokoto* with cap). He was the perfect image of a father. Only the boldest among us ever summoned enough courage to meet him in his office for further consultation or discussion. We all felt inadequate before him. But the beauty of it was that we did well in his course during the examinations. Without realising it, we had soaked in all he taught us, and he became a model of the type of academic those of us who were so inclined wanted to be.

Professor Ade Ajayi did not teach me in the Master’s programme. By then he had retired. Meanwhile, he continued to supervise doctoral candidates. He later came back to the department to teach several years after he had been appointed Professor Emeritus by the University. His “second coming” to the classroom was in 2002. This was the result of a move he coordinated to save the department after it had been denied accreditation by the Nigerian University Commission (NUC)



in 2000.<sup>13</sup> He taught HSS 701 – Problems of Theories and Methods of History – to the Master's class. A close look at the examination questions he set for the course during this period reveals the scope that he defined for the course and the pertinent issues that he raised. The course covered epistemological issues on the possibility or otherwise of historical knowledge; the nexus between history and nation building; traditional African historiography; relationship between history and other disciplines, especially the social sciences; the place of ideology in history; the question of objectivity; causation; various theories of history and other relevant aspects of historical methodology and practice.<sup>14</sup> Only a veteran like Professor Ade Ajayi could have embraced all of these within a single course. To make learning easy for his students, he also shared his resources with them. His personal library in Bodija, Ibadan – Jadeas Trust Library – was designated a resource centre for the Department of History, University of Ibadan. This meant that students and staff of the department could freely utilise the enormous resources therein. These included his publications; a vast collection of books and journals on African history and society, as well as other general reference materials.

### **Ade Ajayi as a Supervisor**

In terms of thesis supervision, the 1990s up till around 2005 were Professor Ade Ajayi's busiest years. Then, he supervised only doctoral theses. His personal disposition to his students at this time was very benign and benevolent. Even though he was very professional and all his students were adults, he still related to them *in loco parentis*. He looked out for each of them and was concerned about their welfare. If a candidate was having problems with his research, he would take it upon himself to assist in resolving such matters. Again, where a candidate, for whatever reason, did not show up for a while, Professor Ade Ajayi as a dutiful supervisor would go and seek out such a student to find out what went wrong. This was the case with James Ngozi Obiegbu in 1991 when he was overwhelmed by a heavy teaching load at the University of Abuja where he was then lecturing, as a result of which he could not keep up with his doctoral programme.

Those were not the days of mobile phones. After making several unsuccessful attempts to reach James, Professor Ade Ajayi, during his next trip to Abuja, sought for his student both in his office and at home in July 1991. Unfortunately, James was not around. James was so touched when he heard his supervisor came looking for him that he immediately reported in Ibadan to continue his work. He subsequently defended the thesis titled "The Growth of Aba as an Urban Centre, 1900-1960: A Study of the Relative Contributions of Internal and External Factors" on October 9, 1992.<sup>15</sup> James Obiegbu did not stay in the University system for too long before he moved to the Federal Civil Service where he had a distinguished career. In October 2012, he was appointed Permanent Secretary (Career Management Office) under the Office of the Head of the Civil Service of the Federation.<sup>16</sup> In April 2013, he was redeployed to the Ministry of Police Affairs, where he is still serving.<sup>17</sup>

Again, Professor Ade Ajayi, as a mentor wanted the best for his students and so was always willing to provide references for them. He wrote glowing recommendations on their behalf for research and travel grants, academic fellowships and for job placements (including promotions in the case of those who already had jobs). The references for fellowships and research grants were the most numerous: Fullbright Fellowship in the USA, Commonwealth Scholarships/Fellowships tenable in any part of the British Commonwealth, DAAD Fellowship in Germany, SEPHIS Grants/Fellowships, CODESRIA Grants for Thesis Writing, CODESRIA academic and various training workshops in Dakar and other parts of Africa, Leventis Fellowship at SOAS, Cadbury Fellowship at Birmingham, the Five College African Scholars Fellowship funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in the USA, etc. Professor Ade Ajayi also helped his students to source for privately funded grants like the one endowed by Chief Raymond Zard for the project on Archdeacon Emmanuel Alayande of Ibadan. Ade Ajayi's students won these and other prestigious grants and awards due to their competence, a direct result of the sound training he had given them, and the full backing he gave their applications through his glowing references.



Apart from James Ngozi Obiegbu, other doctoral candidates supervised by Professor Ade Ajayi in the 1990s included Kyari Mohammed, whose thesis was on "Borno Under Rabih Fadl Allah 1893-1902: The Rise and Crash of a Predatory State". Kyari is now a Professor of African History and Director, Centre for Peace and Security Studies at Modibbo Adama University of Technology, Yola.<sup>18</sup> Ezekiel Oladele Adeoti concluded his doctoral programme in 1995. His research topic was "Western Education and Social Change: A Case Study of Archdeacon Alayande's Contribution to the Development of Ibadan, 1948-1983". He is now a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History, Lagos State University.<sup>19</sup> Olufunke Adeboye was also supervised by Ajayi in the 1990s. Her thesis titled "The Ibadan Elite, 1893-1966" was examined in 1997. She is now a Professor of History and Head, Department of History and Strategic Studies, University of Lagos.<sup>20</sup>

Professor Ade Ajayi's graduate students in the 2000s included Saawua Gabriel Nyityo, who defended his doctoral thesis on the Tiv in 2003. This thesis was immediately published by the University of Ibadan Press as *Political Centralisation and Transformation of Tiv Society, 1900-1965*. Nyityo is now an Associate Professor at Benue State University, Makurdi. Babatunde Sofela was another candidate. His thesis titled "A Comparative Study of the Emancipados in the Slave Societies of Brazil and Cuba in the Nineteenth Century" was examined in 2004. Dr Sofela is now a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History, University of Ibadan.<sup>21</sup> There is also Adeyinka Theresa Ajayi, who worked on "The Impact of Colonial Policies on the Textile Industry in Eastern Yorubaland". She is now a Senior Lecturer in the Department of History and International Studies, Ekiti State University. The breadth of the subjects covered by all these theses also show the extent of Professor Ade Ajayi's competence in African history on the continent as well as across the Atlantic. He was at home supervising women's economic history (by Yinka Ajayi) as he was with the political issues raised by Kyari Mohammed. Social and educational issues pursued by Dele Adeoti and Funke Adeboye were actually within his primary turf. After all, he had published in 1966 a classic on the making of an educated elite in Nigeria.<sup>22</sup> His

students were indeed very privileged to have been trained by one of the founding fathers of Nigerian and African historiography.

Professor Ade Ajayi related warmly with his students. He opened his personal library to enable them benefit from his rich resources. He also gave them opportunities to work with him on several academic projects. These special projects also served as training opportunities for them in project execution and advanced writing. I recall with fondness my experience under his supervision. He invited me to work with him on the *UNESCO General History of Africa Project*. He had edited Volume 6 in the series, which focused on Africa in the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> He was subsequently commissioned by the Scientific Committee of the UNESCO History of Africa Project to abridge the same volume. I felt very honoured when he asked me to assist him in the abridgement exercise in 1990/1991. The abridged Volume 6 has since been published in the *UNESCO History of Africa Abridged Series*.<sup>24</sup> Professor Ade Ajayi was so impressed with my contribution to the project that he issued a personal letter of commendation on 16 September, 1993, which says, *inter alia*:

I am pleased to inform you that the International Scientific Committee has now approved for publication all the 29 chapters of the Abridged Version of Volume VI of the UNESCO General History of Africa. Not only that, most of the expert commentators reported favourably on the quality of the abridgement, as faithfully reflecting the spirit of the main edition, and yet original in its own way, not being just an attempt to summarise a complicated story, but picking out the essentials of the story, and telling it in a simplified but not simplistic version. I want to congratulate you on this and to put on record my personal appreciation of the intellectual effort you invested in the work. As you know, the quality of the final version depends as much on the quality of your drafts as on the revisions I was able to make to them. I hope you would have learnt something from the exercise which will be of value both in your teaching and in your research.<sup>25</sup>

I was not the only one that benefitted from this type of apprenticeship. Saawua Gabriel Nyityo was Professor Ade Ajayi's personal research



assistant for almost a decade. They worked closely together on several projects and it was while working as a full time staff with Professor Ade Ajayi that Gabriel registered for his doctoral programme and successfully completed it under the former's supervision. Professor Ade Ajayi periodically granted Gabriel time off his normal Research Assistant schedule to conduct fieldwork on his own doctoral project.

To reminisce about my days on the doctoral programme under Professor Ade Ajayi's supervision is also an opportunity to acknowledge the hospitality of his wife, Chief (Mrs) Christie Ajayi, whom we all fondly call "Mummy". Her hospitality was legendary. She did not treat us like "students" but made us feel a part of the family, even to the point of insisting that we join the family at meal times. This atmosphere of love and care made us all flourish. Most of us successfully completed the programme.

The commitment and despatch with which Professor Ade Ajayi handled our theses drafts must also be acknowledged. He did not delay our work. He promptly read all drafts submitted to him and offered copious comments. If he knew of other academic experts from whose comments our theses drafts would benefit, he promptly arranged for our work to be sent to such individuals. This was my experience when he gave the first draft of my thesis on the "Ibadan Elite, 1893-1966" to Professor J. D. Y. Peel, a sociologist at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Professor Peel made extensive comments and suggestions, which made me rethink many of my ideas. The immediate benefit of that exposure was that the quality of my final thesis was greatly enhanced. In the long term, that experience also made me appreciate the value of the multidisciplinary approach to historical scholarship. That has since remained a key component of my scholarship, almost two decades after that encounter. That, for me, was also the beginning of an academically rewarding relationship with J. D. Y. Peel.

Professor Ade Ajayi's direct students were not the only ones that benefited from his academic mentorship. He regularly hosted foreign students and junior academics; facilitating their stay in Ibadan or other

parts of Nigeria and connecting them with various institutions and individuals that could assist them. One of such visitors was Monica Belmonte, a PhD student at Georgetown University, USA, who came to the Department of History, University of Ibadan in 2000 for three months.<sup>26</sup> There are various other examples too numerous to mention.

### **Conclusion**

Professor Ade Ajayi as a mentor and teacher imparted several professional skills and expertise to his various students. In terms of academic reproduction, one can confidently conclude that not only does he have academic children, they are in two generations. Those he supervised before his retirement in 1989 could be classified as his first-generation offspring while those he brought forth in his post-retirement/emeritus years would qualify as the second-generation academic children. To both generations he imparted not just historiographical skills but also life skills. The older he became, the better he modelled to us the humane touch that must underline teaching and supervision for them to be impactful of what we have received and learned from him, we are bound to give to the generations of students that are under our mentorship, tutelage and supervision too. Success in this regard would not only be ours but also part of the legacy bequeathed to us by our teacher and coach par excellence, Jacob Festus Ade Ajayi. He has handed us a bright shining torch; it is our duty to keep the flame alive and hand it to the generation coming after us.