

**Professor Jacob Festus Ade Ajayi, 1929-2014:
Our Foundation, Our Mainframe, and Our Roof**

A Eulogy with a Dirge

By

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È jẹ́ á sògbéré
Lójú oorì ẹnì ó kú;
K'á lè rẹ̀ni tí ó sògbéré lẹ̀hìn tàwa
Níjọ a bá lọ

It is honorable to render a dirge
At the grave site
Of the one who has gone to be with the ancestors;
So that those we leave behind
May perform a similar dirge for us
When we join our ancestors later.

It was with much sorrow that we learned on Sunday morning (August 10, 2014) of the passing, a night before, of Professor Jacob Ade Ajayi. He was an eminent

historian, a public intellectual, a celebrated educator, a famous administrator, and a devout Christian. Patient and attentive, he listened to the voices of various generations of Nigerians and also represented them full well in a legion of writings and speeches. He listened when many people were deaf, and he looked while many were blind. His death marks the end of an era laced in an epoch of the first generation of African historians who carved niches for themselves. Indeed, Mother Africa has lost one of her best sons; while historians have lost a leader; and the Christian community a *confidante*. Professor Ajayi was no ordinary man, but a larger-than-life figure, full of sheer charisma. He was widely known as a very generous scholar whose library was the refuge of many students and scholars. A highly respected figure, he had an incredible sense of place, and he occupied a

preeminent one both in the writing of Nigeria's history and the history of Nigeria itself.

Death reveals the geography of one's influence; the landscape of one's contacts; the environment of one's being; the memory of one's history; the fragmentation of one's wholeness into its component strands. While death may be profoundly final in terms of a state of physical relocation; yet it can be expansive in the creation of a new being who instigates a set of new narratives. The dead no longer register their physicality, including the emotions of the living. But perhaps the dead even feel much better than the living, who knows?

Erín ti wó, kò le dide.
Erín ti wó, kò le dide.
Àjànàkú sùn bí òkè.
Erín ti wó, kòle dide.

The mighty one has fallen
The mighty one has fallen

The famous one is gone to be with his ancestors
The mighty one has fallen.

II

In that fragmentation that divides life into its various chapters, Professor Ajayi's contributions to the discipline of history will form the core of the various obituaries—no doubt, and as it should be expected—as he was indeed a pioneer, the pillar of the discipline in its formative years. Let me pour the libation, like a payment, to this first chapter, but only in brief. He was an innovative and pioneer historian of nineteenth-century Africa, contributing to our understanding of missions and missionaries, the formation of a new Western-educated elite, and the transformations that took place in that long

century. He was adept at locating the internal forces that drive changes, an orientation that can be described as centering the “African perspective” as opposed to the Eurocentric.

Talented and brilliant, *Ojogbon* Ajayi revealed the complexities of institutions, practices, and beliefs that emerged in the processes of encounter, not just by imposition but through the agency of Africans themselves and as dialectic engagement. His analysis of the colonial era warned that its impact should not be exaggerated, describing it as a mere episode. Where others saw a break with the past, he saw continuity. In this regard, he was one of the very few to balance the histories of Western and African institutions, while privileging the survival of African cultures. Then followed several studies on the post-colonial period, with major essays on development,

culture, higher education, and politics. In totality, his publications and writings spanned well over a two-hundred-year period, the products of a rare intellectual figure with a unique command of a long sweep of time. Two of his distinguished students, Professors Michael Omolewa and Jide Osuntokun, honored him as recently as this year with a long *festschrift*, *J. F. Ade Ajayi: His Life and Career*.

III

His research carried itself into the classroom, creating a second chapter in Professor Ajayi's life. With his reputation firmly established, he supervised many graduate students who went on to become intellectual superstars in their own right; they took the ideas of the Ibadan School of History to other parts of the continent

and beyond. He reshaped the entire curricula of the University of Ibadan's history programme, introducing new courses in African history, thereby contributing to the decolonization of African Studies as well as its scholars. His standing, as a teacher, was also matched by his outstanding contributions to textbooks that became popular throughout the continent, influencing and shaping such major examination bodies as the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and the General Certificate of Education in London. Away from those archives and classrooms, he gave countless lectures, full of knowledge and wisdom, that were always well attended:

K'ówó, k'ówó.
Àràbà ò wó mó, ojú t'ìròkò.
K'ówó, k'ówó.

The wish is that the imposing àr̀̀̀ tree should
fall
But the àr̀̀̀ tree has survived
The wish that the imposing àr̀̀̀ tree should fall
has failed

IV

But there is a third chapter, the contribution not to history but to the nation itself, to history making, to “nation building,” the term that Ajayi himself preferred. Dr. Ajayi’s childhood experiences show the interplay of historical forces. He grew up in the colonial era, benefiting from schools established by Christian missionaries. He contributed to the intellectual formation of his country, within the crucibles of nationalism, as a pioneer student at the University of Ibadan where he studied English, Latin, and History. For his Ph.D., he

studied the century preceding his birth, in order to understand the foundation of a new Western-educated elite and the new agencies of modernity. He became a professor at his Alma Mater, and was involved in its management in the 1950s and 60s. In 1972, he was appointed the Vice Chancellor of the University of Lagos where he consolidated his credentials as one of the country's leading intellectuals.

Professor Ajayi harnessed the fruits of his path-breaking research to offer advice to his community and nation. In this, he was generous and sincere in public affairs. He did not cause offence, but showed commitment to issues of development, democracy, and higher education. His solidarity was always with his colleagues for the promotion of the best in the university system. He did so within a commitment to the role of the

humanities, and to his preoccupation with the place of culture. Truly urbane and cosmopolitan in speech and appearance, he was always polite, measured, and rational. He was not opposed to alternative opinions, and did not even challenge the firebrand orientation of some of us in the 1980s. Never did he discourage dissenting opinions nor penalize critics. While he recognized authority and the privileges associated with it, he was careful never to abuse either.

He occasionally intervened in politics to bring about peace and to diffuse political tensions. In addition to regularly teaching at the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), Kuru, Baba Ajayi at various times, contributed to political engineering by organizing mediation meetings with politicians. When the relationship between President Obasanjo and Governor

Ayodele Fayose, then governor of Ekiti State, was at the brink, Baba not only lent his voice but also met with the duo. At the pan-Yorubaland level, he was not only an unseen hand in the drafting of many position papers and policy directives, but he was also adviser to many of the Yoruba governors.

He did not engage in the adulation of public figures, but regularly insisted on drawing from past traditions, paying attention to the peculiarities of our circumstances and rethinking any model that failed. History as a discipline, he once lamented, was becoming irrelevant for its inability to contribute to the task of nation building, and he called on his colleagues and future historians to rethink their methodologies, tools, and narrative orientation. He strongly believed in academic freedom, and he was critical of those who, through association with

the military and politicians, contributed to undermining university autonomy. His social conscience enabled him to speak truth to power.

V

Call this chapter four. He was a Christian, and he and his wife, Chief Christi Ade Ajayi, conducted Christian Fellowship at their house in Ibadan. For them, fellowship is a communion of fellow minds, but its leadership requires the creation of a moral center, uncommon talent, erudition and impeccable integrity. It was these characteristics that led to the emergence of Elder Ajayi's flock at No. 1 Ojobadan Street, Bodija, Ibadan, Nigeria. I was not a member of that flock but I met many who were influenced by it. Fellowships are sometimes predictable

in their content: praise songs, Bible readings, and sermons. At Ojobadan, fellowship was not just teaching and preaching, but engaging in scholarly examination of the Holy Bible in more practical ways. At times, he was the teacher – dishing out from his pool of knowledge. At other times, Baba Ajayi would become a pupil – learning even from men and women whose levels of education was nothing comparable to his. In general and to engage in positive mimicry, members preach to one another to allow caution to guide their lives, to be mindful of the power of unseen forces to shape their lives, and to call upon positive forces to stabilize their lives. When we have a good meal, have good health and can function, we must thank God. When we have a good friend, we must see it as a blessing. When we have life, we must cherish it. We must support our friends as best as we can. We

must always cherish friends and families, knowing that in the final analysis, we need them to take our corpse, dress it, and put it in its final resting place. And we must keep our families strong, for their memory of us will be what is left:

Òrẹ kítíkítí, ìyekan kàtàkàtà;
Ojọ ọrẹ kítíkítí bá kú,
Ìyekan kàtàkàtà ní kù.
Bẹẹ, ẹnì mi ò ẹni,
Èyàn mi ò ẹyàn
A ò ní fi wé aláàárò lásán

Intimate friends cannot be better than siblings
For when you lose those intimate friends
Siblings will be there to fill the gap
So, do not ignore siblings
And relations
For they are better than outsiders

These were all positive words, radiated and communicated with positive energy, at Ojobadan Street.

VI

But Ojobadan and the career of the historian were connected, creating a narrative for chapter five. For, having become an elder, history becomes a tool for teaching and preaching. Ideas become principles: the affirmation of culture and language; the transmission of values; and the creation of communities that will promote sharing. We have to teach history, both as *itan* (history) and *aroba* (memory). Pa Ajayi's energy and enthusiasm for everything that life had to offer was infectious and inspiring. People who knew him would admire his strength, his passion, his resilience, his exuberance, and his adorably audacious character. I happen to be one of those. I always knew him as someone who could do anything positive, creative, beautiful. He was fiercely proud of his heritage, and he would tell vivid stories of

his childhood days in colorful, folkloric detail. I salute his immortal spirit and know that though he is with God now, his life force will be here on Earth with us forever:

If I claim I do not consume palm oil
The oil produced by Ajayi is an exception
It's as inviting as the camwood
The palm oil produced by Ade is delicious
I am so much in love with palm oil now.
If I claim I do not consume salt
The one whose voice is as-sweet-as-the-salt is an
exception
But, I will not exhibit my wealth by consuming
Jacob's salt excessively
Just one cotyledon of kolanut
is enough for a trip to the city of Oyo
Even if I claim I do not like humorous utterances
What do I do with this orator?
Salt beautifies the black-eyed peas with his palm oil
And makes the (cooked) peas inviting even in the
cooking pot
The one without tribal marks transforms into an
overnight beauty
Homage to you
Great warrior!

VII

Writing about the past leads us to the memory of the past, and it is this memory that will form chapter six of my dirge. An individual can conquer death, and *Alagba Ajayi*, by becoming an ancestor, has done just that. As we are now in a different age, he will not demand of us cocks and palm oil, kolanut and salt, but the knowledge of his own past and the lessons to be drawn from it. He acquired autonomy and freedom during his life, the ability to free oneself both of excessive need and of excessive want. Of course, I am aware of the established arguments by economists that the concept of need and want is irrelevant; it is that of utility that counts, which is what individuals seek that they place value upon. Professor Ajayi got his “utility” right, placing his values on family,

faith, and God. As that utility is not of objects, as in cars and more cars, its legacy endures since it cannot be damaged. And in placing his utility in faith, he becomes transcendental, with heaven as the abode of peace, a place without need and want, without worldly values.

Baba lọ gbáà, a ò rí i
Adé-Àjáyí ti rẹ̀wàlẹ̀àsà
Baba lọ gbáà, a ò rí i.

Our mentor is gone, to be with the ancestors
Ade-Ajayi has gone to the abode of our ancestors
Our mentor is gone, to be with the ancestors

Capitalism teaches us that one can use money to purchase immortality. An African worldview suggests a better alternative. One can become an ancestor by being fundamentally good. The reality that we are daily confronted with evil means that life loses its meaning. To

restore that meaning, we have to be fundamentally so good that we purify ourselves of any evil thinking--it is the very purity of our own mind that sustains us and protects us. An engagement with death is mediated by a worldview that accepts physical disappearance but celebrates memory and spiritual connections. Ajayi's insights, recorded in texts, will offer us a fillip to our famished souls.

Bá a bá kú,
Ère là n dà

After death
People are deified

An ancestor does not die. He is alive. We will always see him as alive, as we require no imagination to re-read his

works, to see his warmth and laughter, to remember his embrace, and his ever-positive words of encouragement. His history will always be with us, a history of a place that was defined to include you and me. We cannot convert this place into one of sorrow, as this would not follow the true spirit of our Baba. We cannot create bodies of pain, as Baba gave us an everlasting love. Our hearts cannot keep anguish, as our Baba taught all of us joy. Baba has left his heart behind, to go to a better home. Wherever he may be now, you all should know that the doors and windows to his abode are open. Today and tomorrow, he looks at you, he gazes at me, he listens to us, and all what Baba can see in Nigeria is hope.

Baba, ẹ tètè dẹ̀yìn bọ̀
Òkú ọ̀lómọ kan kì í sùn

Do not tarry on your return, father
For no parent leaves his/her child unattended

He is not dead. He has only rejoined the earth, to which
we must pay true homage to receive him:

Earth
I pay homage
You who feed and hunger
At the same time!
Your estate of no end
Have I traversed
Your nooks and crannies
Have I journeyed
No one dares you
Who takes back
Everything taken from you
You gobble like the lion at repose
Even the gods, you swallow
Receive him

He cannot die. The tumult of life is different from the
history of life itself. For a heart so large, in clouds and
sun, rain and thunder, Baba will always be here with us.

His heart, large and compassionate, will continue to beat
in the presence of millions of people:

Death, captured in a box
suspended in mid-air
Slowly ascends upward to land on a rock
too far to see.

The phantom is bold.

All of us are in transit. While Baba Ajayi's body has
been taken by God, the legacy of his mind remains fertile.
His soul is uncontaminated by the vicissitudes of the
flesh.

The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his
heart;
Devout men are taken away, and no one understands
That the righteous are taken away to be spared from
evil.

Those who walk uprightly enter into peace;
They find rest as they lie in death. (Isaiah 57:1-2)

His inspirational words are constant reminders of life, not death. And he will continue to exude the promise of our convictions, regardless of his location in the firmament.

Ará ìgbàun dà o ò?
Ará ìgbàun dà?
Ìbá ẹ pé a kì í ku ni o,
Ará ìgbàun dà?

Where are those ancestors of ours?
Where are those ancestors of ours?
If we were created to live and not die,
Where are those ancestors of ours?

VIII

Let me close this short eulogy with a conclusion by asking for blessings for the Ajayi family, all of their homesteads—now and in the years to come. Christians

aptly pose the question: “To whom does our life belong?” They answer in unison: “To God Almighty”

. In this wise, death itself becomes a way to reunite with God who created that life. There can be no mission of Christ without the crucifixion. In death, greater truths are revealed about the meaning of life. May the Lord ease the passage of the eminent historian as he bows out into the glorious realm. May his family be comforted by his life’s accomplishments and his convictions that he will attain eternal life. We shall all exit yonder one day. In the meantime, let us give thanks to God for today. Good tidings will continue to surround them and they will suffer no want. The beacon of light that points the way is what God has made you; your light will shine brighter with each new day and night.

If, indeed, there is need for a bibliographic note, it is that the challenge is how to continue living, deserving what people like Professor J. F. Ade Ajayi have contributed to one's own essence. And for the index, which calls for his soul to rest in perfect peace, we also salute finally:

Şòkòtò máa tú yagba nìşó –
Şòkòtò máa tú yagba nìşó lóde;
Nítoríi òjògbón Adé-Àjáyí.
Şòkòtò máa tú yagba nìşó –
Şòkòtò máa tú yagba nìşó lóde.

Let us dance and celebrate -
Let us dance and celebrate in public;
To honor Professor Ade Ajayi.
Let us dance and celebrate –
Let us dance and celebrate in public.

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