



Professor JF Ade-Ajayi

Vice Chancellor, University of Lagos 1972-1978

A Tribute by

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Sometimes in 1973, about one year after his appointment here, in “Higher Education in Nigeria”, Professor Ade-Ajayi wrote:

“The roots of higher education in Nigeria go back to the colonial period when Nigerian leaders demanded a university as a means of their emancipation. It was vital for their purpose that such a university should be comparable in every way with universities in Britain.”

We are here to say our last goodbye to our former vice chancellor. It is a great privilege for me to be allowed to speak on behalf of those that were undergraduates here during his tenure. My four-year stint as an engineering student 1973-77 was fully within that temporal frame. By the time I was back here as a Graduate Assistant and Masters student in 1978, he had already left the scene. My goal here is simple. I will express it in his own words. The late Professor was so distinguished a historian that it will be difficult to find accolades that are too high to heap on him. He was also an artist in the general sense. And, as with all great artists, their works speak long after that are gone. In a book written several years after leaving the University of Lagos, Professor Ade-Ajayi entered my consciousness again as I read “Patriot to the Core” – a biographical sketch of the venerable Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther. In the beginning of the book, Ade-Ajayi wrote,

“My aim here, while commemorating his death, is to celebrate his remarkable life”

Now JF Ade-Ajayi himself lived a remarkable life. In his stewardship of the leadership at the University of Lagos, he held the baton in the remarkable way that a third-leg runner in a race can make a significant difference and change the fortunes of his relay team by putting the anchor leg at a major advantage. The portion of his Artist Portfolio I limit myself to here is in the physical development of Unilag.

Focusing only on the central academic core of the main campus, if you remove the Main University (Formerly Yakubu Gowon) Library, Main Engineering Complex and Mariere Hall that were completed before he came, and this Senate House that came after he left, it is no exaggeration to say that virtually every other significant building was delivered under Professor Ade-Ajayi. The design and structural quality of these buildings are in accordance with the plan and quality of the core structures the university started with. He did not drop the baton!

- The Arts Complex,
- Jaja Hall,
- Moremi extension,
- Health Centre,
- Chemical Engineering Buildings,
- Faculty of Science,

- Bookshop house,
- Mass Communications Building,
- Conference Centre & Staff Club,
- Haile Selassie (now called University) Auditorium,

in the university main campus core all rose from ground zero to their present state under his watch. The controversial decision to house both male and female students together in newly opened Jaja Hall in 1974 was a pragmatic decision arising out of the sacking of the non-performing contractor handling the Moremi extension. Those of us in the first set of Jaja hall of those days were surprised by the hues and cries that followed that successful experiment. Six years later, in Canada, living in another coeducational hostel, I was able to better appreciate the thoughtfulness of the Unilag experiment.

Those times were not easy! It was an era of military coups and regimes. It was also a time of student unrest. In my time, the University of Lagos suffered closure due to student unrest at least once a year between 1973 and 1977. The protests were always against the military government and it would naturally be difficult for them to understand that the students took these decisions on their own.

As undergraduates we did not make that easy for the government. To us, long before Fela's Kalakuta Republic's famous "secession" from Nigeria, the University of Lagos was a Nation State with Vice Chancellor Ade-Ajayi as Head of State! Once his car was recognized, shouts of "Head of State" rented the air! Ministers, Governors, even "other" Heads of State did not count for much!

Things usually came to a head during convocation events on campus. Students wanted to make it clear who was Head of State in this territory. The military HOS of Nigeria or his representative were ignored, as usual, and our HOS was always hailed as he spoke! In one particular convocation, it was announced that the military government had given a substantial grant to the university. The students, spontaneously, shouted "Too Small!" while hailing smaller gifts of books or artifacts by lecturers and professors! At each student strike, the first thing we did was to remove General Gowon's name from the University Library. The university kept replacing the signboard until it got tired of doing so given the frequency of the student strikes in that era. I did not remember any occasion of lecturers going on strike an undergraduate!

The last time I saw Professor Ade-Ajayi was at Abuja in 2000. He was the keynote speaker at the MacArthur Foundation launching of its supporting intervention in the Nigerian University System. In the hall that day, Professor Ade-Ajayi's forensic analysis of the struggles of the university system was so exacting as he detailed the changes in the leadership from the Senate and senior professors to "three armed trade unions"; the government patronage system that has increased mediocrity, etc. He proffered his own solutions. Sitting in the audience was Professor Umaru Shehu (a former Chairman of Council here) who, noting the pungency of Professor Ade-Ajayi's presentation especially as it directly affected him, remarked, when he had the opportunity, that "Professor Ade-Ajayi does not even spare his friends!"

How then shall we celebrate the *remarkable life* of the Professor JF Ade-Ajayi, our vice-Chancellor 1972-1978? I know no better way to conclude than to give back to our departed professor, his own words albeit abridged to suit the present purpose.

"He was no fanatic on the theory and practice of Higher Education in Nigeria, but he was patriotic to the core!"