



**LOCATING THE
LOCAL IN THE GLOBAL**
Voices on a Globalised Nigeria

Edited by
Şolá Akínrinádé
Modupe Kolawole
Ibiyemi Mojola
David O. Ogungbile



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For enquiries and further information, please contact:

The Dean
Faculty of Arts
Obafemi Awolowo Univeristy
Ile-Ife, 220005
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THE ROLE OF ALUMNI ASSOCIATIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TERTIARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA*

DELE LAYIWOLA**

It gives me such great and unparalleled pleasure to propose the toast of the Alumni of Obafemi Awolowo University under the auspices of our great Faculty of Arts. I am grateful to the Dean of Faculty as well as to the organising committee.

I am glad to return to this great citadel of learning of which I have always been proud and for which I have won the admiration or ire of others wherever I gently remind that Ife University is Oduduwa's alma mater. Oranmiyan or Lamurudu have also been extremely fortunate to be part of our glorious alumni. Indeed, only very few of our ancient godlings did not drink from the fountain of the hills surrounding this sanctuary of learning and culture. And I dare say that its medieval gates are open to all who thirst for real or genuine knowledge. Be they aboriginal, Igbos or adventurous Yoruba.

What I must further clarify in performing this toast to our alumni is to throw some light on the trite saying that no nation can rise above the ideals of her universities or citadels of learning and intelligence.

Institution

The earliest academies of Athens invented structural learning, not in the sense of a curriculum but as an instrument of conscientization, which looks after the conscience, and the spiritual welfare of the citizenry. The whole stock of knowledge was therefore dependent on inspiration and individual genius as exemplified in philosophers and humanists like Socrates (470-399 BC), Plato (428-348 BC), Xenophon (c. 430-c. 355 BC), and an older thinker, Xenophanes of the 6th century BC about whom even less is known. These philosophers moved from place to place and inculcated the principles of liberal humanism.

But the concept of the university as a centre of learning or higher education predated Oxford (1167) and the medical school of Salerno in the 10th century. By the 8th and 9th centuries, the Arabic tradition of higher education had sprung up around the emergence of Islam. The founding of mosques thereby became the material institutional foundations for teaching and learning. Some of the great mosques such as al-Zaytuna in Tunis, Ourawiyyin in Fez and Al-Azha in Cairo, have survived to the present day. As it was in the West, these centres developed the tradition of dedication to learning, moral and spiritual development complemented with selfless service to the community.

The whole concept of higher education and research, therefore, centred on the cultivation, transmission and interpretation of the gem and treasure of Islamic beliefs and traditions to successive generations of believers. Young, impressionable minds were carefully enlightened and cultured according the will of God. As Kenneth Dike documents it:

* Being the Alumni Guest Lecture delivered on the Faculty of Arts Alumni Day, 11 March 2004.

** Professor of Drama, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

It is the feeling of a sincere Muslim shayks (sic) of a sense of mission, a responsibility and a duty under God that cultivate the Islamic sciences actively and to pass them faithfully to the new generation. In this way, they hoped to win the favour of God and to ensure their salvation in the hereafter. (17th November 1973.)

We were further told that it was unthinkable to charge fees from pupils because it would amount to prostituting gifts for gold. This was, therefore, the genesis of 'free tuition', which our governments have stuck on to until this day and on the basis of which we continue to pay eminent lip service.

At the same time, these centres of learning were quickly endowed so that the teachers could be paid some stipend for their labours. I shall come to the question of endowments in a short while. Let me repeat, for the sake of clarity, that citadels of learning, the founts of inspiration like our 'Great Ife' or 'First and the Best' Ibadan cannot survive without ENDOWMENTS and the goodwill of alumni and the citizenry at large.

But I must emphasise that a subtler point has emerged. That is, our centres of learning are the factories for moral and spiritual development for the training of leaders for the morrow. They are not havens of spiritual decay nor are they lairs for gangsters, embezzlers and violent men and women. The tertiary institution as a 'forge' for national development imparts values that transcend the material. These institutions go beyond the manufacturing of technocrats or the production of 'goods and services'. They are meant to be the moral and spiritual nests for the young and the old alike.

I am hoping that the alumni of this great University will not only constitute a 'think tank' but a source of great influence for new elements of learning that will guide and direct our thinking. The moral and intellectual values we seek to disseminate here must be capable of inculcating in us a sense of social purpose; for growth, for development and for vision. For the avoidance of doubt, I wish to state that our Faculties must not only produce the machines, food, medicines and bath soaps, those of the human sciences must cultivate the same minds and the soft hearts in the sound bodies. We are called upon to build a total atmosphere where human beings can aspire to be the conscience of the nation and the custodian of its values.

WWW.ALUMNI.COM!

Having come thus far in defining the role of the university or tertiary institution itself, I shall like to be more specific on the role and importance of an alumni caucus in the life and growth of an institution.

It is almost always mandatory that after its first toddling years, an institution establishes an alumni office and elects an Alumni Relations Officer. In my experience, most of the older Nigerian universities and tertiary institutions have this; what is left is the establishment of a credible alumni directory and an alumni bulletin. As I implied a few minutes ago, the greatness of an institution will largely depend on the overall achievements of its alumni and alumnae. In fact, the credibility of any institution rests largely on those of her 'children' or her products.

In our technological age, all deserving institutions around the world are marketing themselves, their achievements and their alumni on the worldwide web called the Internet and Intranet. They not only reach out to the world, they reach out to their own alumni and

prospective alumnae. This then encourages others to benefit, not only from tertiary education but also from the peculiarities of what each institution has to offer.

The www.com business helps to disseminate research findings in the physical and human sciences. African institutions stand the chance of breaking new pathways in the area of Agriculture and the Fine Arts – visual art, music, drama, etc. In this regard, there is the need to open up our doors to the general public and to the alumni at open days and annual all comers' reunion. This has helped in many British universities to dislodge prejudices and to foster greater understanding. Footages of the highlights can be taken and archived for the basis of promotion and adverts. These can also be recycled on the Internet.

Funding: A Home-grown Educational Enterprise

It is true that in contemporary times we have looked abroad to donor agencies for support and generous endowments and grants. We continue to appreciate the large heartedness of the Fords and the Rockefellers, the MaArthurs and CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency). But to be truly patriotic and home-grown, no self-pride can be achieved unless our alumni are partners with these overseas donors. What do our elites do with their own millions? Why must they stand with their arms folded whilst foreign agencies help to direct the research orientation of their own institutions? Is the post-colonial, post-modern train a shared enterprise? Can we really finance and determine the pace and growth of our own research base and centres?

If it is true as General Yakubu Gowon remarked at the University of Ibadan in 1973, that governments “pour millions of Naira of public funds annually into the universities,” is the public equally gratified?

In 1972, and on the occasion of its tenth anniversary, this great University of ours launched an endowment fund. I shall always remark that single act of far-sighted patriotism. Ife University took the lead and Ibadan followed the following year on the occasion of its 25th anniversary. Another singular act of vision that Professor Hezekiah Oluwasanmi bequeathed to this institution is that he had always called, from this same podium, on the Nigerian entrepreneur, part of who constitutes our alumni and alumnae to invest in low cost housing estates in the vast portion of land around the University. In this regard, he foresaw a period, in fact the present period, when undergraduates must live off-campus to enable them mix freely with their local community. If I remember correctly, that wiry and sage-like Ijebu-jesha man used to point in the direction of both university gates as the areas most suitable for entrepreneurs to harness land and cultivate property.

I sincerely believe that because of the enviable stakes held by our alumni in the future of this great institution, they should be the ones to control the trade of off-campus housing estates for their male and female protégés. A singular act of commitment of this scale will revolutionise the outlook of our up and coming elite. It will not only change the flavour of the curriculum for the better, it will stem the era of brain drain and foster university autonomy. It is clear from my remarks that I have every faith in the goodwill of the alumni of Nigerian tertiary institutions. They can make or mar their alma maters and can hone its dignity before governments, which claim to be passing taxpayers' money into the university. They can influence its research focus and, through it, the prospect of a truly independent nation.

The alumnus does not sit on our governing councils for nothing, and I believe we should bring them on our Senate and our fundraising committees. In several American institutions, the alumni raise over one-third of the entire budget of their institutions and, for the same reason, ensure that the allocations are not misspent. I believe that the alumni of our tertiary institutions, instead of carting wealth abroad for the use of other alumni can do the same at home.

But have we truly cultivated our alumni and alumnae? Certainly not! I do not know of any Nigerian institution which religiously sends its alumni newsletter to every member quarterly or bi-annually informing them of its new programmes, budgetary allocation and expenditure. As a matter of fact, whilst the University of Leeds has never failed to send its bulletin to me each quarter, I have never received a single one from the University of Ife, now christened Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU). Yet, if each alumnus were to donate a hundred Naira of his/her income to the budget of the university each year, we will reap something in the neighbourhood of 10 million Naira each year. There are alumni who might *will* properties and estates to the university after their demise. Why then should we not cultivate the alumni?

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to observe that the worldwide proliferation of universities since the end of the Second World War is notable. This indicates that in the modern world, the sources of knowledge translate to the sources of power. The leading developer of educational and technocratic talent will determine who leads in the labour and the industrial markets. Therefore, we have no choice but to join the race with the superpowers. In Britain alone since the Second World War, between 70 and 90 new universities have been founded.

It is not a question of whether there will be new universities; it is a question of what qualities and specialities they would be. It then means that the role of the alumni in the lives of these newfangled institutions will determine the quality and worth of the products. It is also true that the alumni will become perpetually influential in the lives of these institutions.

We must therefore increase our search for funding so that standards are not compromised. It may well be a signal of caution to the alumni and its own ranks that the more universities there are, the more its works continue to expand in the determination of autonomy; in the commercialisation of research findings and in the determination of the moral and spiritual strength to the human race just ahead of us. For Nigeria in particular, this will be a great new advance in the social and cohesive interaction of generations yet unborn in a world always striving towards a centre.

Once again, I thank you for your generosity and your attention.