Interview with Professor J.F. Ade Ajayi

Q. Professor Ajayi, we would like to know a few things from your experience as a historian of Africa - the first question I think I would like you to respond to is this: I believe you did your high school during the war period (the Second World War): what do you in retrospect see as the important features of the war in terms of its impact on Nigerian society in particular, and West Africa in general?

A. Well, as of the time of the war itself, I mean as students, the things which we felt most keenly of course were the shortages that occurred during the war, such as salt which had to be rationed at some point and maybe sugar and milk that we couldn't get. But as you see, looking at it in retrospect, it's quite clear that the war represented a transition from the period when the colonial regime was concerned largely with the maintanance of law and order and general administration without much thought for planning and development projects, it seemed as if in the course of the war they had to try and mobilise people to do certain things - as I've said, they had to ration salt, and they had to try and utilise the resources effectively for war. In the process they began to think more in terms of development projects. 1944 I think, was the year of the Colonial Development and Welfare Act and people were beginning to think in terms of new constitutions in which the people themselves would participate in government. Some of these new policies involved, for example, the development of higher education in the colonies and this, in turn, began to yield some fruits and foster more development. Also, the number of Nigerians who went abroad - to Ethiopia, North Africa, and the Far East (Burma in particular), coming back also brought new inputs into the social and political development of Nigeria, which was of considerable importance. Again the developments in India - when India became independent - and that example, in terms of impact on the political development of West Africa was very important. So one sees the second World War as something of a watershed in terms of relationship with Britain and the development of indigenous political institutions.

Q. Would you say your generation was aware of the other parts of Africa; I mean the rest of Africa, or do you think by and large, people's horizons tended to reach only the frontiers of West Africa?

A. Well, certainly conscious of the rest of West Africa. As to the question of reaching out to the rest of the world then, we were more aware of Europe and North America than of other parts of Africa. Our knowledge was dictated largely by the emphasis on Empire history, the history of Britain and its expansion to North Africa, Asia and parts of Africa. Even Geography emphasised the geography of the empire, and this very much conditioned our perception of the rest of the world.

Q. When you went from high school to the Higher College in '47 and '48 you also experienced the transformation of the Higher College to the beginning of Ibadan University. What were the problems - what was the situation like - can you give a brief description of the nature of the problems which faced the young university in those days?

A. The Higher College as you might know, was started about 1934 as a very colonial kind of institution, to give some form of higher education, prepare people who attended for government, but not to the full professional level, as assistant doctors, assistant engineers, and assistant pharmacists, etc., even though they would have done full medical courses and full engineering courses. So in many ways the Higher College was very frustrating - administered, as it was, as a government department. The transition from that to a university institution, to which was brought a distinguished scholar from Britain as its principal and he was not under the control of the colonial officials and therefore could try to establish an autonomous university as a real centre of learning, was a very great change. And also we were beginning to get people into the university who were neither missionaries nor government officials. These were the educators we knew before, either missionaries or colonial officials, who of course, were bound by either their religion or the instructions of the colonial office suddenly to find professors who were agnostic, for example, or did not care about formal dress, or feel a preoccupation with praising or upholding the empire, was a completely new experience. On the whole, we found the new university college very stimulating. But of course, the initial subjects offered were very limited. Authorities of the university college were very cautious because they wanted to maintain very high standards; they admitted very few students and the failure rate was very high. They didn't want to start new courses, they said the

library was not yet good enough. After we did what was then called Intermediate, we thought that degree courses would be available in subjects like history. However, when we came back in October '48; they said the only courses available were the classics. I didn't want to do the classics, so I went out to teach for a year came back in October '49, but we were told that they still didn't have honours degrees available in history. We had to do a general degree and so I had to do English and Latin and History, some of which I didn't really find very palatable. But we had to. That was the only thing available. Eventually I had to go to Britain to do a degree in History.

Q. So, you spent the time between 1952 and 1958 in Britain: first in Leicester and then later on in London. What sort of traditions - historical, methodological traditions did you come across whilst you were in Britain, Leicester first, and then later in London?

A. Well, I just of course, did the regular courses that were available in Britain in those days, that is English history and European history, and Commonwealth history; hardly anything about African history, which didn't really exist in those days as an academic discipline. But by the time I had done the degree, and I wanted to select a research topic, and I went down to London, I decided to study the Christian missions because their records were quite copious. In many ways the missionaries were close to the people in Nigeria at the time and their records provided a useful basis for one who generally had to educate himself in African history. It was also a time when in London people began to think in terms of the methodology of African history, the role of a archaeology, linguistics and so on. So that some of the new historiography was being developed in London in the period when I was there from '55 to '58 and of course the development continued when I got back to Nigeria.

Q. Who were the pioneers of the important intellectual antecedents to the ideas you perhaps later used in your own approach to history?

A. Well, there have been a number of people who preceded me in terms of the new methodology of African History. Some of the first people, you might say, were the nationalists, people who rebelled against the idea that Africans have no history and were recording the traditions of various African peoples into various books; then the people of Dr. Dike's generation. Dike took a

Ph.D. in 1950 and later joined the Staff of the University College. I think he was one of the first to insist that all our traditions should be accepted as a form of evidence in historical writing which was a very important development. And we followed in their footsteps. I think it was in 1954 or 1955 that London University appointed the first lecturer in African history - Dr. Roland Oliver who had done some work on Christian missions in East Africa. He organised a number of seminars and workshops on the methodology of African history in which we all participated in '53, '56, and '58, in London, to begin to try and work out some methodology so that the use of these non-written sources for historical writing could be tackled in a systematic and scholarly manner.

Q. You mentioned oral data: what is your assessment - your summary assessment - of the value of oral data as a source of historical evidence?

A. I don't eh ... You have to evaluate each particular data on its merits. As you know, there are various types of oral data: some of them are formal texts that are very formally committed to memory; and various precautions are taken to ensure that the text is handed down with as little change as possible. Some of these are praise verses, which are developed within various families; others are of religious kind, for example, those used in the course of divination. Others are myths in terms of the origin of a particular society. Some are preserved in ritual and handed down from generation to generation as part of the beliefs of that society. Such traditions change and are modified according to the fortunes or ambitions of the particular society. So, oral material like written sources has to be evaluated on its merits. As you know, written sources can be an Act of parliament which has a definite text - it could be a letter in which somebody tries to disguise what's his real motives are: if you take a letter literally you may be mistaken, so you have to evaluate a particular piece of evidence, whether it is written or not written, on its merits.

Q. Which problems would you at this stage identify as dominant ones in contemporary African historical studies?

A. At this very moment, I think we are witnessing the impact of some kind of a Marxist-oriented challenge to the kinds of histories that we were writing in the '60s and early '70s.

The feeling is that we have been writing in terms of decolonisation, the history of the struggle against imperialist societies and so on. Now we have a group of radical people at the moment who are saying that the themes we have been interested in are not necessarily the most relevant - that history must be a factor of change in society. And if you are merely writing a history which shows one bourgeois group of Africans taking over from the bourgeois group of white capitalists without seeking to introduce fundamental social change that is history as a factor of change in society, that one is virtually limited to the role of an irrelevant observer. We now hear slogans like underdevelopment rather than development and so on. And I think it's this kind of debate that at the moment dominates African historiography: that African history should not merely explain how Africans have survived, or how they have managed to take over from the imperial powers, but should actually explain why it is that Africa is far less developed than other continents; and that this ought to be the major factor; that one should get away from the dominance of politics of some of the earlier writings and put more emphasis on economics, and systems of production - the economic and social factors of change.

Q. Do you think these Marxist approaches have any positive contributions to make?

A. I think they do. As I have tried to indicate, there have arisen questions which perhaps we didn't raise before - but at the same time the neoMarxists themselves have been more successfuly raising questions than necessarily answering them. However, in history even the quality of the questions raised is also a factor in the quality and what kind of history we produce.

Q. Recently some observers have said that ethno-linguistics can be in Africa a very important source of historical evidence. What would be your reaction to this sort of positions?

A. Well, eh, I don't like the expression 'ethno-linguistics, ethno-history, ethno-politics, ethno-this, ethno-that'. Either this is linguistics or not linguistics; this is history or not history. And, the linguistics of non-literate societies raises just as much linguistic problems as the linguistics of literate societies. So we would say that linguistics is of course of considerable importance in African history. In many ways we

depend upon, for example, the linguistic classification of Africa to show which languages are related and therefore the people speaking those languages would have had longer periods of historical association. In other words we are trying to derive some history from the classification of African languages. Again we'll expect some data as to factors of chronology, in terms of the length of period in which it would have taken one language to diverge from a related language; you know, the concept of a proto language from which a number of languages that are now related have developed and, working back from examples in Europe where you've had written records - trying to work back how long, for example it has taken, English to develop from old English, or to diverge from German with which it is related, so on. More recently people are looking at some of the languages in greater detail, studying dialects within the same language, and the pattern of the distribution of the distinguishing characteristics of different dialects can also show some of the historical relationships. At least one can try to deduce historical relationships from the particular spread of the different dialects. For example, within Yoruba, one is beginning to utilise dialectology as a way of pushing Yoruba history beyond the eighteenth century.

Q. Do you think the colonial legacy in Africa has had any effect on the teaching of history in Africa?

A. Of course, it has. People of my generation began by learning how Brittania rules the waves: the first use of history was to glorify the empire and secure the loyalty of the subjects. Even when we went to university in Nigeria, the first history course we took at Ibadan was the Colonisation of Africa by Alien Races - it was the title of the book by Sir Harry Johnston which was the main text book for the course. So I think one cannot - I dont't think it's even historical or necessarily desirable that we should get rid of the colonial heritage completely, so we are influenced by it. But despite that, we have made an effort over the last twenty years or more, since the Second World War, to go beyond the colonial heritage - to find out what our real history has been in the past. There are people who say we haven't gone far enough. But at least we are making an effort in this.

Q. Do you think you can identify any differences in the interpretation of African history as expressed by Franco-phone and Anglo-phone Africans?

A. That is not an easy question. Some of the leading Anglo-phone historians would have made themselves familiar with the writings of Franco-phone historians, and vice versa. Therefore, I am not sure that there is necessarily that kind of clear line of division. There is however, perhaps a sense in which one can say that there is a British tradition of historiography developing out of their own constitutional and parliamentary history, which has developed continuously from the same institution from Magna Carta to Queen Elizabeth constitutional monarchy and so on, an evolution with no real revolutionary changes; even when they said they had a revolution, cutting off the king's head, as you know, very quickly they brought another king back and using more evolutionary system. Whereas the French, especially since the time of Napoleon, has seen rather major revolutions, and tend to perceive their history in terms of eras: you know, the 1st Republic, the 1st empire, the 2nd Republic, the second empire, the 3rd Republic, etc. To some extent some of the historians trained in France have also tended to view history in terms of eras and not more interested in feudalisation and so on. But I don't think one can say that there is a clear record of Franco-phone and Anglo-phone traditions of historiography.

Q. Well, I asked this mainly because, for example, in the area of anthropology and sociology, you find that whereas observers like Marcel Griaule in his studies of the griots had concentrated very much on the study of mythology and study of origins. Even in the writings of people like Levy Strauss, and perhaps the later work of Ferdinand de Sousa on Sociology - but they have been mainly concerned with things about origins and interpretations of the cosmos, whereas the British and Anglo-Saxons generally have been more concerned with the problems of economic and social organisation, political, social and economic organisation.

A. That's why I said you can detect differences in British tradition of historiography, and French tradition of historiography. But when it comes to African history, you know, the mere fact that we are all sort of using the same sources and interpretations and so on; and the extent to which it's the British speaking Africans who have been giving a lead in the writing of African

history, and the English and few French-speaking Africans generally become acquainted with the historical concerns of one another, it's not so easy to make a clear distinction. One can say that the Marxist interpretation of history which we have been talking about has come into African history largely through, not exclusively, but largely through French radical historians. They have been more prominent than, say, British historians; and this has been because of the strong impact of the communist party in French intellectual society. The only other significant input has been from Latin America, where because of the social situation, you know, people have been asking similar questions in Latin America and it was a British trained historian fron Guyana, working in Tanzania, again with a socialist background, who helped to pioneer this new school within African history - so one can see, it's not excluding French-speaking, particularly as African history is concerned.

Q. But then, the question remains. I think if perhaps I can single out examples to represent the descriptions you gave. On the one hand we can single out Suret Canale for the French, and then on the opposite side in the camp of the British, perhaps one can single out Basil Davidson, who has come in as an amateur but has joined more or less the ranks of the professionals in the study of African history. Whereas Suret Canale today enjoys academic respect-ability as it were, there is still very often a lot of noise about the dilittante aspects of somebody like Davidson. What would your reactions be to such observations?

A. Well, I don't know in what circles you move. Suret Canale has had difficulties all his life within the French establishment to get accepted. Outside the French establishment, of course, and we take Suret Canale on Guinea in terms of the value and freshness of his analysis. In the same way, there is a sense in which Basil Davidson is better accepted within even the established circles in Britain than Suret Canale in France. As you know, Basil Davidson wrote about Anglo and Guinea-Bissau. People might shrink but not when he attempts general studies of Africa and general interpretations, which are not ideological but bringing in fresh insights arising out of his radical background. Being less bound by imperialistic orthodoxy has added much freshness to his writings, and he is therefore more easily accepted. There is greater ideological confrontation in France than you find in Britain, where

even the radical ones find their place in the broad spectrum of the Liberal Arts and therefore less direct confrontation.

Q. Well, thank you very much, Professor Ajayi.

A. Thank you, too.