

AKINJIDE OSUNTOKUN: AN APPRECIATION

ADDRESS BY THE CONVENER, NETWORK OF NIGERIAN HISTORIANS AT THE 70TH
BIRTHDAY COLLOQUIUM (“RETHINKING HISTORY”) IN HONOUR OF **EMERITUS**
PROFESSOR AKINJIDE OSUNTOKUN, OON, FNAL, FHSN, REDEEMER’S
UNIVERSITY, MOWE, OGUN STATE, 17 APRIL 2012

PREAMBLE

Host Vice-Chancellor, Chairman of this Colloquium and Vice-Chancellor, Osun State University, Professor Sola Akinrinade, FHSN, Leaders and Members of the Network of Nigerian Historians, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Students.

On behalf of the Network of Nigerian Historians, I thank our hosts at the Redeemer’s University and other wellwishers, who have joined us today to honour a distinguished man of letters, the urbane and humane Emeritus Professor Akinjide Osuntokun, OON, FNAL, FHSN, former Nigerian Ambassador to Germany, and incumbent Pro-Chancellor and Chairman of Governing Council, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti. But before delving into my personal remarks about **Osuntokun, the Man**, permit me to appreciate the Network of Nigerian Historians (NNH), organizers of this event.

THE NETWORK OF NIGERIAN HISTORIANS IN PERSPECTIVE

The NNH was inaugurated on October 13, 2010 at the University of Ibadan, the fountain of historical scholarship in Nigeria as we now know it. The event was attended by 23 academics of all ranks from various Nigerian Universities. The major highlight of the event was the

Roundtable presentation on “Administrative History and the Crisis of Governance in Nigeria” by Professor Taiwo Akinyele, Head, Department of History and Strategic Studies, University of Lagos.. The revised paper has now been published in the NNH Monograph Series, which is available from today. In December 2010, the NNH organized another Roundtable addressed by Professor Akanmu Adebayo of Kennesaw State University, USA. The revised paper entitled “History and Historians: Who is Afraid of Us?” is scheduled to appear as Volume 2 in the NNH Monograph Series.

Given the mission of the Network to build the capacity of historians, especially younger ones, and collaborate with like-minded organizations, it organized two workshops, one in May 2011 and the other in March 2012. The latter was originally scheduled for December 2011 but was postponed because of the protracted ASUU strike. Selected presentations at these workshops are being revised for publication. It is worth noting that the NNH workshop on “Engaging with the Archives” was supported by the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, the French Institute for Research in Africa (IFRA) and the Lagos State Records and Archives Bureau (LASRAB). The event attracted over 70 participants from sixteen institutions and organizations. Hence, today’s Colloquium follows a clear pattern of rigorous scholarly exchanges, robust engagement with State and non-State stakeholders, passionate projection of History as a living and lively subject, capacity building and academic mentoring, and the promotion of high standards of historical research and academic publishing.

One of the current engagements of the NNH is partnering with a State government to restore History to the junior secondary school syllabus and to inject it into the senior primary school curriculum. Next, it is organizing a major conference in October 2012, the second anniversary of

its founding, for which funding has been provided by the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, through the good offices of its Director, Professor Isaac Olawale Albert, a leading light of the NNH. As well, we are executing a book project on “The Twentieth Century in Nigerian History.” The uniqueness of the book project lies in the combination of two elements – an analytical chapter on each decade, and chapters on the epochs, episodes and leading personalities of the century.

It is evident from the accomplishments of the past eighteen months and the future plans outlined above, that the NNH is a moving train that has taken on a life of its own. It accommodates scholars, activists and students, who are committed to restoring the lost glory of the discipline. Permit me to acknowledge the self-sacrifice of members of the Steering Committee, who have voluntarily and consistently funded the NNH. So far, we have charged no membership levies in spite of pressure from members. I also appreciate the quality and commitment of NNH members (at home and abroad), who are driven by a common vision without any expectations of pecuniary rewards, positions or honours. The NNH gratefully acknowledges the financial and material support of its partners.

Finally, on behalf of the NNH, I would like to thank Professor (Mrs) Funke Adeboye, Dr. Kenneth Nwoko and Ms Leye Dairo, and our Secretary-General, Professor Tayo Adesina, for organizing this Colloquium, which was originally mooted by Professor Hakeem Tijani. Surely, this promises to be another outstanding NNH event. Mr Abimbola Olulesi, Senior Assistant Registrar at Caleb University, deserves all credit for delivering our maiden publication at short notice.

AKINJIDE OSUNTOKUN: A PERSONAL TRIBUTE

Having shed light on the NNH, please permit me to pay tribute to the man of the moment. My remarks are personal, based upon my remote and close association of over 25 years with the man fondly called “Prof,” “Oga” or “Oga Osuntokun.” To be sure, “Oga” in his case means “Mentor,” “Leader,” “Father: Figure,” and not “Boss” as might be assumed!

My earliest encounters with him were at the Conference on the History of the Peoples of Lagos State in 1986 and at the Ogun State University, Ago-Iwoye, where we nominated him to give a Faculty Public Lecture in 1986/87. This was before I formally joined the Department at UNILAG in September 1987.

It is fair to state that well into the 1990s, Emeritus Professor Osuntokun was often misunderstood by many who interacted with him from a distance. His critics described him as aloof, if not proud, and, more derogatorily, as “omo Ijoba,” an expression that a senior colleague in a sister discipline employed to insinuate that “Prof.” was too close to the (military) government. That colleague did not share our grief when “Oga” was incarcerated by the Sani Abacha junta because he reasoned that the government had merely dealt with one of its own in its own way! Professor Osuntokun was even seen as a Muslim/Arewa apologist going by the reaction of an undergraduate student of his at the 1986 UNILAG Conference, when the Professor urged the speakers to conclude proceedings in good time because some people would be going to the mosque for *Jumat*. As an aside, the Professor was never a Muslim but was being tolerant of other people’s faith – a trait that is in short supply in some quarters. Yet another group – and I was

sympathetic to it – vilified him for being a “Demo,” for daring to write the Akintola book. Still others have criticised him for being “too soft” on students.

I have gone to this extent to show that greatness is accompanied by its pains, including gross misunderstanding. To counter some of the negative stereotypes, I can assert that the great man is one of the most accessible persons of his status that I have ever interacted with. A few examples will suffice. First, when I relocated to UNILAG in September 1987, he served as the Head of Department, who signed my assumption of duty papers. In that capacity, he beat the odds to secure my family official accommodation at Ilupeju with the kindness of the late Professor Akin Osiyale, the Chairman of the Housing Unit. More importantly, he permitted me to spend most afternoons in his personal office where he shared sundry experiences with me. Yet, at the time, I was a totally unknown quantity who had merely contributed my first paper in print to a book of selected papers from the 1986 Conference that he co-edited. He was under no obligation to take me under his wings, much less into his confidence. Second, sometime in 1988, when he was Special Adviser to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Lagos, my wife and I barged into his office – in spite of the gatekeepers – and he was rather bemused than affronted by our gatecrashing. Third, he patiently explained to me that he wrote the Akintola book to find out how and why a man who had been deemed “good” for fifty years, suddenly became “bad” in his last five years or so. So, even with my fundamentalist Action Group background, I had to concede that his scholarly inquiry and adventurous spirit deserved respect. Fourth, Professor Osuntokun did not consider it a big deal – as others in his position would have done - inviting me and my wife to Germany on our way back from Japan in 1994, housing us, sharing his dining table, ensuring that we did not make use of public transport for a single moment, personally driving us to Church, offering me his pulpit (which I declined), and assigning a guest pastor to help us hunt for

vehicles as far afield as Essen. Such was the treatment we received that a staff of the Embassy remarked that he had not seen any Nigerian visitor so well treated by the Ambassador.

Professor Osuntokun has always been interested in my academic and professional development. He pointedly told me not to publish in a particular Nigerian journal, a piece of advice that I heeded with some secret bewilderment since others were publishing there. But that golden advice to be selective in my publishing has really helped my career. He also forced me to develop interest in international relations by “dumping” his course on me. When I complained that I already had three courses to teach, he told me that it was an order, not a piece of advice. Preparing for and teaching that course expanded my intellectual horizon. To be sure, he has had to bear the burden of my endless requests – sometimes at very short notice – for references for postdoctoral fellowships and even for my current job as Vice-Chancellor. His sagely admonition (“You cannot keep a good man down”!) has also been a source of encouragement in difficult times.

Professor Osuntokun is the public scholar *par excellence*. He has maintained sustained, profound and admirable engagement with the polity and public policy as an activist, writer, opinion moulder, policy formulator and technocrat of distinction, with his bold imprint on foreign policy and international relations, environmental awareness and media-driven political discourse (via his long-running regular columns in the newspapers). In all of these engagements, “Oga” has never shied away from controversies! Hence, he is both a Nigerian nationalist and Yoruba patriot, and has had to pay a price for his convictions. For his pains, he was incarcerated in the infamous Col. Frank Omenka-run Abacha-era detention camp at DMI, Apapa. On a

personal note, it was when some of us from the Department visited the DMI to deliver some relief items to him – and we were not let in – that I visited that part of Lagos for the first time!

I salute the large-heartedness, kindness, maturity, restraint, forgiving spirit and tolerance of Emeritus Professor Osuntokun. He is very loving, and often sentimental, and has demonstrated great capacity for enduring pain and adversity with equanimity. His sartorial elegance (for which a wag called him “Allan Poser”) shows that decency is no pride, and that you need to dress the way you want to be addressed. His good looks, sharp intellect and oratorical prowess make him an uncommon bundle of God’s gifts to humanity.

But “Oga” is too trusting, and his tolerance and sensitivity have often been easily exploited by the unscrupulous. Happily, God, knowing his good nature and good intentions, has been his armour.

I am very proud of my association with Emeritus Professor Akinjide Osuntokun, scholar, diplomat, gentleman and mentor *par excellence*. He is a rare breed, well bred, properly and broadly educated, decent and humane. I now invite you to the banquet of intellectual discourse that we have prepared in his honour on the occasion of his 70th birthday.

Hearty congratulations, sir, and many happy returns.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for listening. God bless.

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