

MEMORIES OF BAMAKO, MALI ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

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It is ten years since the epochal event of September 11, 2001, when two civilian aircraft were crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York City. This piece recalls where I was, what I was doing and how I managed the unprecedented crisis of that day. It is instructive that until the event, I was blissfully ignorant of the importance of the WTC towers beyond their height, second only to the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur. It was only after the event that I appreciated the import of an old photograph of my Canada-based younger brother, Dr. Sunday Akinola Olukoju, on the 102nd floor of the building. How fortunate we were that he was not visiting on September 11, 2001!

I was in Bamako, Mali in September, 2001 when the towers fell. Four of us from the Department of History, University of Lagos – Professor Anthony Asiwaju (who had just handed over the headship of the Department to me), Dr. Taiwo Akinyele, Dr. Olufunke Adeboye (both now full Professors) and I - had joined other African historians for the third Congress of the Association of African Historians, the first in three decades. Bamako marked the resuscitation of the Association and it was a privilege to have been part of a pivotal moment in the Association's history, thanks to the leadership of Professor Asiwaju, now a Professor Emeritus, the *chef de mission*, who facilitated the participation of the Nigerian contingent. Professor Asiwaju was elected one of the Association's Vice-Presidents while I was subsequently appointed a member of the editorial board of its journal, *Afrika Zamani*. I also got to know Dr. Charles Becker, who introduced me to the vital resource, the H-West Africa Network, that I subsequently introduced to Nigerian colleagues back home. The week in Bamako was exciting, full of various activities - paper presentations (by all members of the Nigerian team, among others), networking and social activity, climaxed by the banquet hosted by Alfa Konare, President of Mali and his wife, Adama, who were Professors of History in their own right. The sumptuous banquet at Kouluba Palace, set on a massive hill overlooking the city of Bamako and the majestic Djoliba (River Niger), included performances by *griots* and cultural troupes, and a giant barbecue that the over one hundred participants systematically demolished within thirty minutes!

But the festival of academic reunion was rudely disrupted by the event of September 11, 2001. I recall vividly that it was during a break in our normal conference proceedings that a Ugandan participant, Philip Kasaija (whom I nicknamed “Peripatetic Philip,” on account of his restless networking) burst in to announce: “the twin towers have fallen.”! I did not know what the “twin towers” meant but the excitement in his voice made us rush out to see the CNN coverage of the event. The horrific scene riveted us all. We all knew immediately that the world, indeed, our worlds, would not be the same again. We concluded the Bamako Congress all right and were all elated about the revival of our Association. However, if anyone imagined that the events in far-away United States would be limited to that country, the reality of an escalating global crisis dawned on us at Bamako airport as we set to return to our different countries. The snowballing chaos in the global aviation sector – leading to the swift collapse of several otherwise healthy airlines - had crept on us. Flight schedules had been disrupted with many flights cancelled. Not unexpectedly, there was a scramble for space on the few available ones. After a long wait, we got a flight to Lagos, with a stopover in Abidjan. Arriving at dawn, we found refuge with the Adeboyes in nearby Ikeja, from where we dispersed to our various homes later in the morning.

September 11, 2001, was a watershed in world history. The world has known no peace since that apocalyptic event. Sadly, the world is a far more dangerous and more polarised place today than it was on September 10, 2011. And there are no signs of abatement on the horizon.

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