

## Letter from Ibadan

Ibadan,  
running splash of rust  
and gold-flung and scattered  
among seven hills like broken  
china in the sun.

John Pepper Clark-Bekederemmo, "Ibadan" (1961)



In the spring of 2007 I sent most of my office library at Dartmouth to Dr. Folake Onayemi and her students and colleagues in the Classics Department at the University of Ibadan. Margaret Graver and other colleagues at Dartmouth also pitched in. Save for a few monographs on obscure themes that somehow escaped our notice, most of the books were assembled for university teachers



and their students.

We had all met some years before when Folake was on a research leave in the States and had remained in touch ever since. About 1,200 volumes went by the slowest of slow boats—the container of choice was the “M-bag,” the least expensive way in

international shipping to send printed material via the postal system—but they finally got there. It was a quite something to see familiar old friends from our office shelves in Hanover, New Hampshire now displayed in Classics offices in the Arts College at Ibadan. I went to Ibadan at the end of the week in November in which Barack Obama was elected President to give a lecture and some classes.



Traveling to Ibadan on the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway is dangerous and my host in Ibadan avoids the Expressway whenever she can. I read later that the great Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe was gravely injured in an accident on this very highway, from which he has been confined to a wheelchair ever since. The roadbed is in poor condition, with trucks and abandoned vehicles in every stage of being stripped for parts strewn all along it; cars can be stopped and everyone robbed, occasionally even killed. So can the pedestrians who wait to cross until there is a break in traffic that when it can speeds along at 70 miles an hour or faster. We passed a number of police checkpoints where nothing much seemed to be happening about controlling the traffic. Drivers were indefinitely detained while their papers were checked until a bribe could be collected. Closer to

Ibadan I saw something more encouraging: a number of stands with beautifully carved wooden bowls for sale.



As it turned out, these are basic tools for making *ilyán*, the pounded yam (*ishu*) that is a starch staple of Yoruba cuisine.



Nigerian yams are huge, not the sweet variety Americans know, and in the pounding and the cooking they turn into a tasty, starchy paste that resembles fresh Hawaiian *poi*, or the texture



of Italian *gnocchi*.

Stewed fish, chicken, or goat is served in a peppery sauce that includes okra and hot peppers, a clear ancestor of Louisiana Creole and Cajun cooking. Another favorite dish includes giant forest snails several times the size of their French cousins, *les*



*escargots*.

Wole Soyinka writes about collecting them when he was a child in *Ake*, his memoir of growing up in the Nigeria of his grandparents. When fully cooked they're chewy, and like their

French cousins bring to mind childhood memories of the texture of pencil erasers. They are prepared by being rinsed first in salt water to get rid of their slime, marinated in lime or other citrus juice, then grilled and finally poached in a stew. Nigerians eat with the right hand only, and with a minimum of mess I found impossible to achieve. Knives and forks were available. The left hand must never be used. Even children born left-handed use only their right hand in public; to do otherwise would reflect badly on their upbringing.



The year 2008 marked two anniversaries for Ibadan. It is the oldest and largest research university in the country and was founded in 1948, twelve years before independence from Britain. In its sixtieth year it has 19,000 students, a faculty of 1200 and supporting and administrative staff of 3,300. Approximately 2,400 of these students are in the College of Arts, the equivalent of humanities faculties in American universities and colleges. Ibadan is choked with traffic jams, urban pollution and a high population density, with an urban infrastructure that is frequently overwhelmed, but the University itself is a tranquil enclave inside a security perimeter guarded by checkpoint entrances. In addition to classrooms, libraries, labs and other kinds of academic centers Ibadan houses most of its students and a large number of its faculty in what Americans would call its campus, this one of 1032 hectares (roughly 2,500 acres).

In the rainy season in this part of Africa the storms can be torrential and last for weeks, as this system of storm drains on campus suggests.



In early November Ibadan had just entered its dry season, with high humidity and prevailing temperatures in the 80s and low 90s Fahrenheit. People often tell me I should have no problem with

this, since I'm originally from Texas. But Texas only exists as it does because it is air-conditioned. Ibadan was, but sporadically, because of power outages.

Some of Nigeria's most famous poets and writers studied at Ibadan, including Achebe, Soyinka, John Okigbo, and J. P. Clark-Bekederemmo. The cityscape celebrated in Clark-Bekederemmo's 1961 poem "Ibadan" no longer exists; to see something like that "running splash of rust...scattered among seven hills" you need to go to a less overdeveloped city like nearby Abeokuta. There are eight faculty members in the Classics department, plus four administrative staff. Folake is the current Head of Department, and her special area of research lies in readings of Classical and African poetry and mythology. At present she's at work on a comparative study of Greek and Yoruban mythology in which she talks about the trickster gods Hermes (Roman Mercury) and Eshu-Elegba and others who figure importantly in the fiction of Ishmael Reed (*Mumbo Jumbo*, *Last Days of Louisians Red*) and such scholarly studies as Skip Gates's *Signifying Monkey* and Lewis Hyde's *Trickster Makes This World*.

The talk I gave was the second in honor of Constantine Leventis (1938-2002), a Classical scholar educated at Clare College, Cambridge; David Konstan of Brown gave the first in 2006. Constantine and the Leventis family have been major benefactors of the department at Ibadan. My lecture about African



that my friend and colleague Bill Cook and I have written for the University of Chicago Press. Constantine's son George represented the Leventis family. The occasion was also honored by the presence of J. T. F. Iyalla, the Nigerian ambassador to the United States during the Biafran war in the late 1960s. Ambassador Iyalla is a loyal alumnus of the Classics department at Ibadan

and one of its most important benefactors. Along with the Vice Chancellor and the Dean of Arts and other university dignitaries, the current ambassador of Greece to Nigeria Harris Dafaranos also attended. Donations of every kind, whether of books, money, or any other benefactions are crucial for the survival of higher education in the Humanities in Nigeria, and this is largely what the event was meant to underscore.

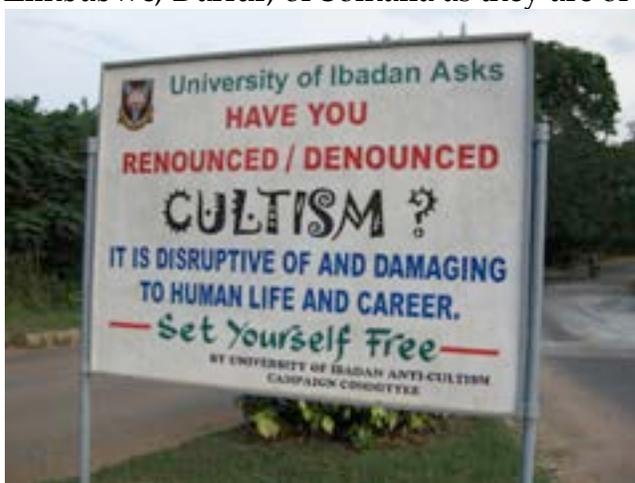
The Leventis Lecture was a formal occasion, with twelve speeches, introductions, forewords and afterwords surrounding my talk, all explaining why we were gathered together and who we were, and why all this mattered.

This tradition of carefully explaining who is present at such an event, and why, carried over into African American public gatherings, in churches and other institutions in the States and remains a distinctive feature of African American public life today. As Bill Cook informs me, short cuts in such ceremonies in African America are unthinkable. In spite of this day's heat and humidity, so were they here.

The other anniversary at Ibadan in 2008 was a commemoration of the publication of the best-known work in Nigerian literature, Chinua Achebe's 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe took his title from Yeats' 1919 poem "The Second Coming." As a work of fiction, *Things Fall Apart* could be classified as an historical novel, set as it is in mid-nineteenth century at the time of the first British missionaries' arrival in the part of western central Africa that eventually became Nigeria. But thinking about literary genres will probably not be the first thing that occurs to Achebe's readers today. The intertwined invasions of Christian missionaries and British colonial armies that come down on the hero of the novel Okonkwo, his family, and everyone else about them proves to be as deadly as the world of "The Second Coming."

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

These famous lines could serve as a quick plot summary of *Things Fall Apart*, which has proven to be Achebe's masterpiece: powerful, concentrated and haunting to read. They seem equally prophetic about current events in Zimbabwe, Darfur, or Somalia as they are of Nigeria today. University students



in Ibadan, Lagos, and other centers have joined cult groups that can be as savage as the American urban gangs made famous by the 1991 film *Boyz n the Hood*. Evangelical Christianity is in evidence everywhere in the western part of Nigeria where the Yoruba live, just as Islamic fundamentalism is in the northern part where the Hausa people are. At the University Guest Houses where I stayed, you were as likely to hear a revival meeting

underway in the tents outside as an evening of karaoke. When I reacted more or less charitably to an hilariously catastrophic explosion in the bathroom plumbing, the attendant who looked after things asked me as she left, "Are you a Christian?"

Thereafter my lodgings were well-stocked with morally improving evangelical fiction, dramas in which the chastity of young men and women is cruelly tested but ultimately saved, and proselytizing tracts. A television soap produced in South Africa and widely popular throughout sub-Saharan Africa brought the same kind of message: adultery does not pay, but it sure is popular. People who commit sin suffer in seemingly unending chains of family dramas that move back and forth between traditional African settings and the suburban life of cars and condos that modern Africa offers to those who can afford it.

I found a new book by two historians at the University of Texas at Austin to be good introduction to the whole history of this part of western Africa, from earliest times, through the era of slavery and colonialism, up to the present day. In their *History of Nigeria* (Cambridge, 2008), Toyin Falola and Matthew M. Heaton don't pull any punches in a candid account of the kleptocracy that has steadily impoverished Nigeria since it gained independence from the British in 1960. It has a larger population than any other nation in Africa and became its second wealthiest after the discovery of vast oil reserves in the Niger River Delta in the late 1950s. But decades of ethnic and religious conflict, military coups and uncontrollable official corruption since independence have reduced the average Nigerian to an income of scarcely two dollars a day. This kind of life is often cited as one of the reasons why there is a proliferation of things like cults among Nigerians of student age, as well as strong competition between Muslims and Christians for supremacy. There is not adequate housing, the water supply is frequently polluted and in most shanty towns sewage systems are non-existent. Power outages are a constant feature of life both by day and by night, and anyone who can afford it has a generator at home to kick in whenever the current goes, which can happen hourly. Everyone you meet not only has a cell phone, but is also likely to be using it.

The current abuse of choice among the wealthy is the proliferation of high-powered armed convoys escorting rich people around the city of Lagos, as if they were the President of Nigeria himself. An editorial cartoon from *The*



*Guardian* of November 13, 2008 outlines the problem: the powerful people can afford to hire policemen (on- or off-duty), military officers, or just plain armed thugs to drive in force ahead of their Mercedes or BMWs, to clear out the people, cars or anything else that may be in the way.

By Falola and Heaton's reckoning General Sani Abacha's regime (1993-1998) was the worst of all. Abacha was the last in a

string of military despots who reduced Nigeria to an international pariah state by hanging the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa and seven other Ogoni activists in 1995. Since then civilian government of a kind has returned, and Nigeria's standing in the world has improved. It has elected its second civilian president Umanu Yar'Adua (2007 to the present), the hand-picked successor of the first, Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007), but Umanu Yar'Adua's presidency marks no substantial change in a pervasive culture of corruption. He was recently spared impeachment by a 4 to 3 vote of Nigeria's Supreme Court. No one believes this amounted to a vindication; more likely he was acquitted because he had already been in office for over a year, and elections are not that far off. According to Will Connors' recent report in *The New York Times* (December 13, 2008), "Yar'Adua's pledge to end corruption was undermined by the demotion and forced exile of the country's popular antigraft czar. After making the first concrete efforts to prosecute corrupt leaders, several of whom landed in jail, the official was driven into hiding after two attempts on his life."

The major source of corruption lies of course in oil. The reserves of the Niger Delta are currently being fought over by Dutch Shell and other foreign oil companies who have contracted rights to export; nominally protected by the government, their refineries, pipe lines, and imported foreign workers are increasingly the target of robberies, bombings, and kidnappings. The poor people in the countryside regularly try to tap into oil pipelines, in a desperate attempt to get fuel oil that often leads to massive explosions and loss of life. On the flight back from Lagos to Atlanta I sat next to an American oil company executive who had just concluded one of his regular visits to Nigeria to check on his company's assets. He was from Houston but beyond that declined to reveal which company he worked for. He did allow that Nigeria was probably the most corrupt country imaginable to do business in, as it is now one of the most dangerous. But his firm had no choice; too much oil is at stake. Bad as it was, he added, Nigeria is not yet Iraq.

This is the unavoidable world that surrounds the 1032 hectares of the University of Ibadan and its Classicists. To say that it makes realists of everyone would be an understatement. When I arrived I did find much optimism about the American elections, as in this letter to the editor from a reader of the local newspaper *The Guardian*:

I thought it was a joke, I thought it may not happen in my life time. It finally turned into a reality. A black man will occupy the White House for the next four years. Yes we can and that is the result of hope.

I must confess that I lost a couple of bets. We need to pray for Obama for the next four years. He is holding the mandate of every black man all over the world. Perhaps this will open our eyes in Nigeria. We need a radical departure from the past. A sick nation, a sick President.

We have a nation of 419 thieving politicians without conscience. *Awon omo oju ti ori ola ri.*\* Miscreants in power.

With tears in my eyes at this moment for my beloved nation, I dare say, we need a change, a radical departure from the past, we have been challenged and we can start the process now. Let us commence the process of networking to change this Nigeria. Yes we can. (*Bimbo Okulaja, Lagos*)

Mr. Okulaja is guided by Obama's inspiring rhetoric, much as those of us were who made it to the Mall in Washington on January 20<sup>th</sup> to witness his inauguration. A more critical comment on what Obama's election might mean for Africa could be read in Mohammed Haruna's column "People and Politics" in the same issue of *The Observer*. To know what Obama may mean for Africa, Haruna argues, it is necessary first to know what his election means in American politics.

It is patronising to the black race to consider Obama's victory on November 4 as enough in itself. It is not. The victory is, of course, important, but unless he uses it to try and save America and the world from the misadventures of the neo-conservatives, his victory will mean little or nothing to humanity.

Repudiating the economic philosophy of Bush and Company will, of course, not lead to the dismantling of their legacies overnight. But if Obama can achieve even that, he would have done enough to justify the imagination with which his presidential bid gripped Americans and the rest of the world.

In his acceptance speech, Obama repeated the slogan of his campaign, "Yes we can," no less than half a dozen times. If his victory is to mean anything to America and to the rest of the world, he must, of course, try and deliver on some, if not all, of the promises he made.

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\* Dr. Onayemi kindly glossed this proverb for me in an e-mail of December 30, 2008: "The phrase refers to pedigree. Literally it means 'Children of those who have never seen wealth.' It is a figurative way of saying that poverty has been entrenched in their lineage so much that it affects the reasoning and the behaviour of a person, and it is often used to describe anybody that is grabbing, especially when in a public office. The indication is that such people steal so much because they have been so deprived by poverty. It is also used to describe someone who does not behave properly, especially in public. In this wise the wealth being referred to would be the wealth of proper upbringing or home training. The full phrase then is '*omo oju o ro lari to npe rare ni olaniyonu,*' 'A person or child who has never experienced wealth before who now proclaims that wealth is troublesome.' It is a cultural phrase that needs an explanation or understanding of the Yoruba concept of good behaviour for full comprehension. It does not mean that the Yoruba despise the poor, but that they believe that misbehaviours are a result of some psychological deprivation or lack of proper training."

I hope and pray to God that I am proved wrong, but chances are that he won't be able to deliver much. The more important thing, however, is that he must be seen to have tried. It is simply not enough that he is the first Blackman to rule the most powerful nation on earth.

It seems to me that Mohammed Haruna's argument is also a good demonstration why the mission of the Arts College at Ibadan is as crucial for the future of the country as any other part of the University. He is nothing if not critical, and while he writes about the news of the day he isn't constrained to simply repeat it. One of the most characteristic effects of studying such seemingly impractical subjects as Classics or philosophy is the way they can make you more detached, more critical. Liberal education can impart the useful illusion if always not the fact of having some kind of critical distance from the accidents of time and place you happen to have been born into. As Nietzsche puts it, you learn how to regard things with hostile calm.



Besides the big public events I taught several classes for Folake's Latinists on the end of book 3 and the beginning of book 4 of Vergil's *Aeneid*. Chosen at random from what was at hand and xeroxable in her office, these passages show as well as any how you can take any part of this great poem as a kind of DNA structure out of which the whole can be derived. The end of book 3 and the beginning of 4 juxtapose a hero's voice (Aeneas's) with a royal queen's (Dido's), each of them locked in a growing intimacy marked by what will also prove to be

a tragic level of mutual incomprehension. Folake's students knew feminist theory as well as they knew their grammar. We spent roughly ten minutes discussing the implications of the opening word of book 4, the contrastive conjunction *at* ("but/on the other hand"). As teachers always think—and just as often, students don't—the time just flew by. One of Folake's students Lilian Njoku was there; she is the President of Ibadan's association of Classics students, *Hoi Phrontistai* (Greek, meaning something like "The Deep Thinkers," "The Big Brains"). ↓



So also were her colleagues Dr. Kunbe Olasope ↑ and Idoure Alade, a doctoral candidate in Roman history who will be on a research fellowship at Brown later this academic year.

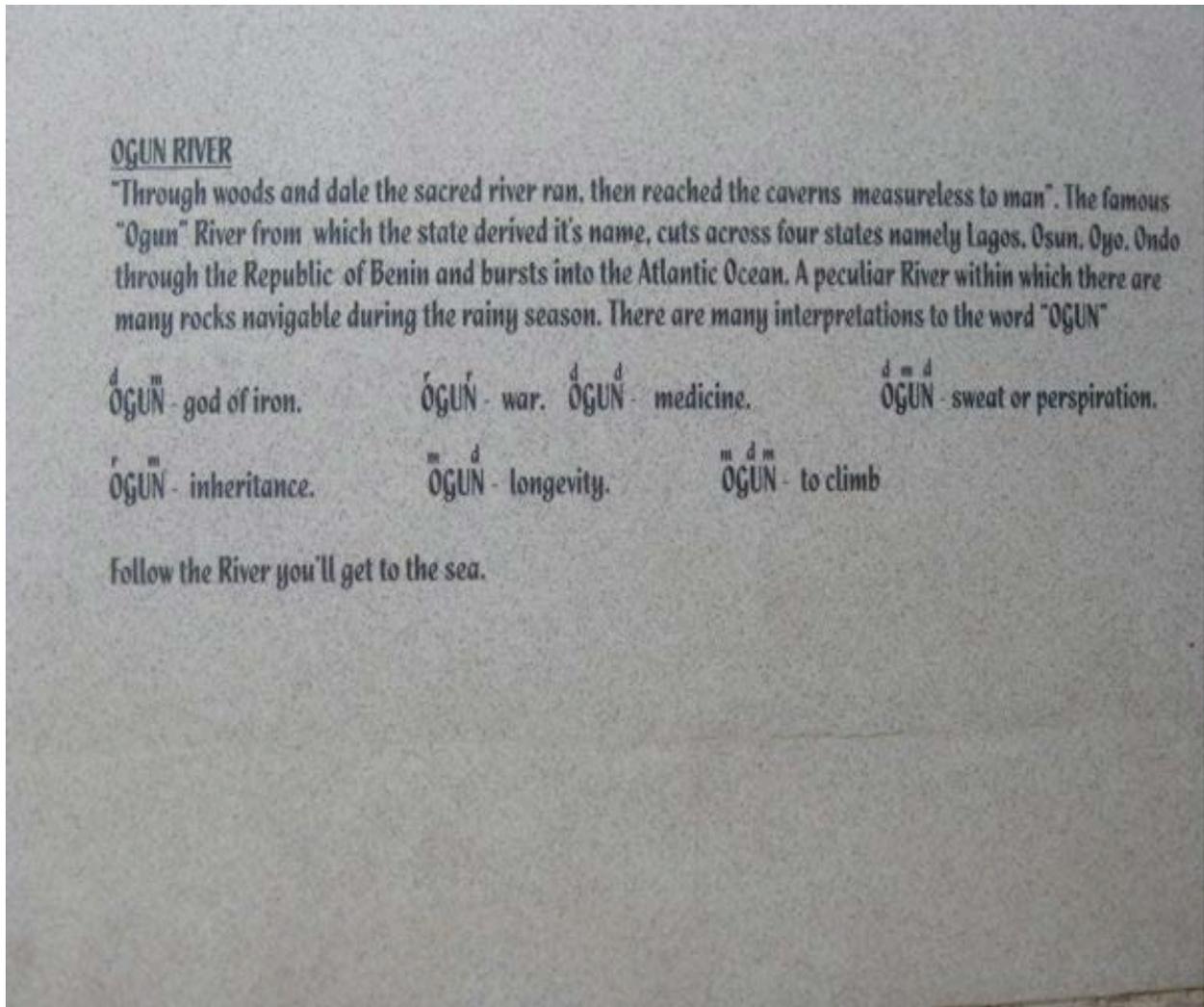


All of us went on an excursion to the Olumo Rock in the city of Abeokuta in the neighboring state of Ogun.



↓ ← This natural rock citadel of about 100 meters above Abeokuta is where local patriots in past times would take refuge from invaders. An elaborate series of three elevator towers rivals Olumo Rock in its monumental size. They take you from ground level to the top reasonably quickly, though it's still possible to walk up. Among many attractions at this

tourist Mecca was one that would capture the eye of anyone interested in languages. A stone tablet laid out in English shows how the sounds of the Yoruba language change and how words' meanings change with them. The example used was the word *Ogun*, the name of the river and the Nigerian State.



The Yoruba spoken by 25 million people in western Africa resembles ancient Greek, Chinese, or Vietnamese, in that its words have *tones*, not stress accents such as the English way of saying "I-BAD-an," as opposed to "Ibadán," with a higher tone on the last syllable, and no stress on the second. Yoruba's tones correspond roughly to the markers that Alexandrian Greeks devised to help us *barbaroi* (barbarians) learn their language: the grave (˘), acute (´), and circumflex (ˆ), from which the French *accent aigu*, *accent grave*, and *accent circonflexe* derive. There are many other diacritical marks in the Yoruba alphabet that can indicate still further variations in vocal inflection. The grammar I consulted as well as this monument on the Olumo Rock uses the Italian musical tones *do re mi* to indicate the possible sounds, each abbreviated to *d*, *r*, or *m*. And this installation illustrates the way meaning can change simply by changing the tones of the word *Ogun* itself. Spelled the same way in each case, the shifting tones of *Ogun*

can also signify “god of iron,” “war,” “medicine,” “sweat or perspiration,” “inheritance,” “longevity,” or “to climb.” On top of Olumo Rock I wouldn’t have been surprised if these meanings were inspired by the imposing site itself: figuratively speaking, perhaps “to do the Ogun-thing” would be to climb, to sweat a lot, implicitly to be able to enjoy longevity, and, thinking of the history of the site, to wage war.

Less a cause for speculation is where Ibadan’s Classics and Arts College go from here. As a guide book Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton’s *History of Nigeria* seemed to me a carefully considered one, even though it often makes for a grim read, and its story is reinforced by what I got to see in the country around me. The last image in their book is of a throng of Nigerian children, with the caption, “Nigeria’s Future.” What other conclusion could there be after writing and reading a history with such realities and such a past? This future was easy to see in the many school groups I met that were visiting the University’s Botanical



and Zoological Gardens.

As Folake said to me at one point in our travels, children are the most valuable thing anyone in Nigeria can have. Their education at Ibadan is a fundamentally optimistic enterprise, as education should be, and not least in the Arts College and its Classics department. May the Kumbe Oloasopes, Idouire Alades, and Lilian Nijokus of the next generation be among them. ↓

