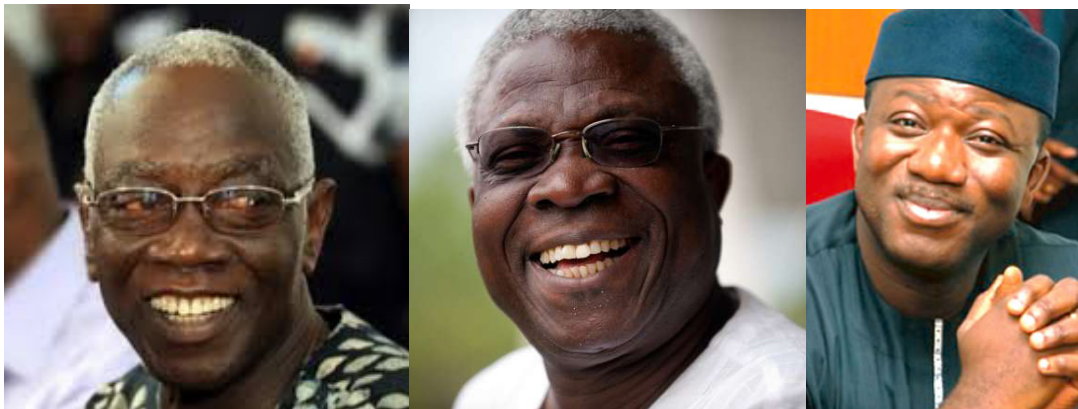


Lamps of Our Past

by
Richard Joseph

The global arena is replete with insurmountable conflicts. The major European countries are experiencing a crisis of leadership and political institutions. We are whiplashed in the United States by presidential tweets and the dismantling of programs that took years to create. China is a growing military and economic power, but its system of government finds few external adherents. For Africa, looking inward is not a choice but a necessity.

At a conference on state, conflict, and democracy at M.I.T. in 1997, Prof. Kwadwo Afari-Gyan, Chairman of Ghana's Electoral Commission, emphasized the need to "take stock of our achievements and failings". We must, he added, "look into our past in order to see into the future." This summons is more urgent today. Prof. Niyi Osundare, Nigeria's splendid poet, encourages us to use "the lamps of the past to light our future". In his October 15 lecture at the inauguration of Dr. Kayode Fayemi, elected to a second term as Ekiti state governor, Professor Osundare extolled the values long associated with Ekiti's people, especially the pursuit of educational excellence.



(from left)) Profs. K. Afari-Gyan and Niyi Osundare, and Gov. Dr. Kayode Fayemi

I have had the extraordinary privilege of sharing in the last half-century of Africa's journey, and four decades of Nigeria's. Two Nigerians, one of whom I taught at the University of Ibadan, Prof. Mojubaolu Olufunke Okome, and a more recent colleague, Dr. Sam Oloruntoba, were on a panel at the annual conference of the U.S. African Studies Association in Atlanta. The aim was to brainstorm about a Collaborative Learning Initiative on Governance and Development (CLI). This Initiative began a few years ago when I opened my personal archives to student researchers at Northwestern University. Of particular interest to the students are the peace and democracy efforts of The Carter Center during my tenure as a Fellow, 1988-1994. They dubbed this experience "immersive learning", "opening time capsules", and looking through "windows to a complex tapestry".

Five themes have been suggested for CLI: Engaged Scholarship and Immersive Learning; Access to Knowledge and Knowledge Production; Closing the Governance Gap;

Building Democracy; and Reclaiming Security. Under this umbrella, I also hope to transfer much of my personal library to an African institution and arrange access to digitized archival documents. Several research and teaching institutions, and dozens of scholars, will be invited to collaborate.



CLI brainstorming, Nov. 30, 2018. (from left) P. Englebert, C. Logan, S. Oloruntuba, R. Joseph, M. Olufunke Okome, and P. Robinson

In this essay, I will focus on the fifth CLI theme: *Reclaiming Security*. Attempts to reclaim security in many African countries, tragically, often lead to greater insecurity as rulers respond by heightening repression. Some even close down access to social media and global communications thereby harming already fragile economies. As many of Professor Ayo Olukotun's colleagues and correspondents, I am able to read his weekly *Punch* columns online. They often address Nigeria's governance failings and security deficits. In a similar vein, Professor Tunji Olaopa, in his inaugural address at Lead City University on November 20, referred to the low perception of public service: "water, education, roads, and security are at an all-time level of inefficiency."



Public vehicles and street vendors in Lagos; filling a jerrycan at a public fountain (Punch)

A striking example of how citizens can rise up to reclaim security from state institutions and political elites is the current Yellow Vest movement in France. Nigerians, who engaged in mass protests in January 2012 against sharp increases in petroleum prices, were moved as their French counterparts by sentiments of “economic insecurity”, “social distress”, “distrust of institutions”, and “hatred of the winners in the global system”. (*New York Times*, 6 December 2018). As is evident in many countries today, populist anger can be captured and channeled by authoritarian nationalism. It can also be manipulated, as Professor Osundare says of Nigeria, by demagoguery, vote-buying, and electoral thuggery.



Voting in Ekiti's gubernatorial election, July 2018. (Eagle Online)

Nigerians regained the power to shape public policy after an arduous struggle to end military rule in 1999. Yet the insecurities caused by prebendalism and predatory governance have relentlessly increased. Attempts to reclaim security are driving distressed herders and farmers in Kenya and Nigeria to wage war against one another. They also suffer from forceful efforts by the state to stem the carnage. Many cases can be cited to show how the pursuit of citizens' security (of life, possessions, and basic needs) can provoke the very opposite: greater insecurity as in Cameroon, Congo-Kinshasa, and South Sudan. An issue that deserves increased examination is how the insertion by foreign powers throughout Africa of special forces, military bases, and drone squadrons is impacting citizens' security.

One of the most hopeful developments in the continent in 2018 has been the emergence of a reformist government in Ethiopia under the leadership of Abiy Ahmed. Sustained opposition to the “revolutionary democracy” imposed since the overthrow of Mengistu Haile Mariam and the Dergue in 1991, and an unrelenting popular uprising in recent years, forced these changes. The vision of a truly democratic and inclusive Ethiopia was never extinguished during twenty-seven years of autocratic rule. The same can be said about the more dictatorial system established in Eritrea under Issaias Afwerki.



Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopian Prime Minister since April 2018, waves to a crowd. (Zacharias Abubeker/AFP/Getty Images)

Even when dimmed in one country, the lamps of liberty can shine through from another. Ethiopians look in particular to Nigeria as they rethink their ethnic federal system. During an era of “democratic backsliding”, looking to the past can help us peer into the future. Contemporary challenges are mirrored, and we benefit from unearthing intellectual, social, and policy responses. In this spirit, I intend to make much of what I have learned about the Nigerian experience widely accessible.



(from left) A. Olukotun, F. Adesola, R. Joseph, and M. Omotoso, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 2015

I will also encourage my colleagues to do likewise regarding countries they have long studied. Niyi Osundare envisages a Nigerian “society which places priority on knowledge, on the wisdom which brought it into being, and on its generation and purposive command”. If CLI becomes a reality, it will endeavor to reflect this vision.

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