



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 18 · THURSDAY 1 OCTOBER 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 18 · NIGERIA AT SIXTY

WE THOUGHT WE WERE GOING TO THE MOON

He turned down an American green card because the projections said his country would outrun Europe. Then came the first step off the edge.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 18 — recorded on Nigeria's sixtieth independence anniversary, and largely autobiographical.

FROM THE ARCHIVE · NIGERIA AT SIXTY

We Thought We Were Going To The Moon

The most personal broadcast in the archive. A green card refused, a housemaster's one sentence that redirected a career, and the single event he holds responsible for everything that followed — told on the sixtieth anniversary of the country it happened to.

A solo broadcast recorded on 1 October 2020, the sixtieth anniversary of Nigerian independence. The Professor flags on air that the Nigeria-heavy format is a departure and that the programme returns to its usual international range the following week. **What emerges is a memoir told through public events: the Queen's visit, Ghana's head start, Lumumba's killing, an English teacher who took the questions well — and then the year the table lost a leg.**

An archive edition, recorded 1 October 2020, in the eighth month of the Covid-19 emergency and a fortnight before the #EndSARS protests began. Dates, offices and figures are described as they stood; where the Professor's recollections differ from the record, the correction is noted rather than quietly fixed.

01 · EIGHTEEN, AND ALREADY UNCONVINCED

He was eighteen at independence, and the memory he reaches for first is from before it. The Queen visited while he was at secondary school in Lagos; the boys were marched out to a playing field and waved Union Jacks as she drove round. What struck him was not the ceremony but the arithmetic — that someone so young was carrying that much.

At independence itself he was, by his own account, not happy. The men he thought should be leading the country, on the strength of what they had done to win independence, had been

sidelined. At that age he had not yet worked out how elections and voting produced that result, and his conclusion was blunt and premature and, he implies, not entirely wrong: there must be something wrong with this thing called electoral democracy.

There was a domestic angle. His father had been elected to the House of Representatives for the independence parliament — so the boy watching the national stage was also watching a member of it at home, and he is candid that the two got mixed up.

The compensation, shared by his whole cohort, was relief that Ghana would have to stop ribbing them. Accra had been independent since 1957 and had the leading African voice in the world; Nigeria was finally at par. Even so, he admits that Nkrumah made a stronger impression on boys of his age than their own prime minister did, and that they wished their man were as visible.

“I thought: this thing called electoral democracy — there must be something wrong with it.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 • THE ENGLISHMAN WHO TOOK THE QUESTIONS

The killing of Lumumba landed while he was still at school. He did not join the demonstrations — schoolboys did not — but followed them as closely as a devoted newspaper reader could, working through the Daily Times.

The detail that makes the passage is who was teaching him social studies at the time: a young Cambridge-educated Englishman. The Professor's questions, put across a classroom in the middle of the Congo crisis, were not gentle — why did it take you so long to give us independence among them — and he says now that he hopes he did not embarrass the man.

What he remembers is that the teacher had a sense of humour and let the argument run. Long debates, in class, with the empire's representative, conducted on level terms. It is offered as a small thing and functions as the hinge of the whole broadcast, because the next story is also about a teacher.

“Our social studies teacher was an Englishman. I asked him why it had taken so long to give us independence. He had a good sense of humour.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 • ONE SENTENCE, AND A DIFFERENT LIFE

He was going to be a doctor, for the least examined of reasons: his elder brother was reading medicine. So he took science in the upper sixth — biology, zoology, physics, chemistry — and sat the examinations.

Afterwards his housemaster, who also taught him zoology, called him in and said one thing. If you study medicine with a hundred per cent of your intellect, you will be an ordinary doctor. If you study diplomacy with fifty per cent of your intellect, you will be a first-class diplomat. Therefore change your course.

He changed his course. He figured the man knew what he was talking about.

Asked whether he ever went back to thank him, the answer is no — he left the country as soon as the higher school certificate was done, and by the time he returned to teach at Ibadan ten years had gone. He calls it an omission, and does not soften it.

“If you study medicine with a hundred per cent of your intellect you will be an ordinary doctor. If you study diplomacy with fifty per cent, you will be a first-class diplomat.”

— The housemaster, as recalled by Prof. Akinyemi

04 • WHAT A COUNTRY OWES ITS TEACHERS

The moderator observes that teachers are no longer treated that way, and the Professor agrees on both counts — a grievous mistake by the younger generation, and an atrocious one by governments.

His model is Finland, and he sets out the two features that matter. You must hold a first-class degree to teach. And teachers are paid more than civil servants, on a reasoning he states plainly: you are surrendering to them your most precious product, the children who will run the future, so they must be the best of the best while those brains are still forming.

Against that he sets the position across much of the continent, where teaching is the lowest of the low and the standard sentence is that one is teaching while waiting to move on to something else — because the pay is poor, the conditions atrocious, and the motivation absent.

His evidence is again domestic. His father taught in a secondary school, and teachers then were ranked among the upper class: listened to, respected, and forming the characters and careers of a generation. That, he says, is a mistake we can correct.

“You are surrendering to them your most precious product — your children, who will be in charge of the future. They must be the best of the best.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 • THE GREEN CARD HE TURNED DOWN

Asked what he had hoped to see by now, he answers with a fact about himself rather than a wish. He was offered an American green card, and with it citizenship, on a platter of gold — and he stresses immediately that this was not unusual. Most of his generation were offered foreign citizenship, because they performed brilliantly and their professors wanted them to stay.

They said no, and it puzzled the Americans, because in the 1960s foreign students fell over themselves to get in and to remain. Nigerians were going home.

The reason he gives is the line the issue is named for: they had a vision of Nigeria going to the moon. And he insists the vision was not a fallacy, and lists the evidence available at the time. Western, Eastern and Northern regional television services, running when several European countries had none. A teaching hospital of the first rank, with surgeons trained in England and returned home, world-renowned enough that he was told the King of Saudi Arabia came there for treatment. And a projection, made towards the end of the 1950s, that a Nigeria continuing on its trajectory would within a decade be more developed than a good many European countries — a belief held not only by Nigerians but by the scholars who came to study the place.

Then the sentence that lands hardest, delivered without dramatics: the hopes crashed, the vision crashed, and he knows people who died of heartbreak, because they could not understand how a country that began with so much ended in such a mess within four years.

“We had a vision of Nigeria going to the moon — and it was not based on a fallacy. I know people who died of heartbreak.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

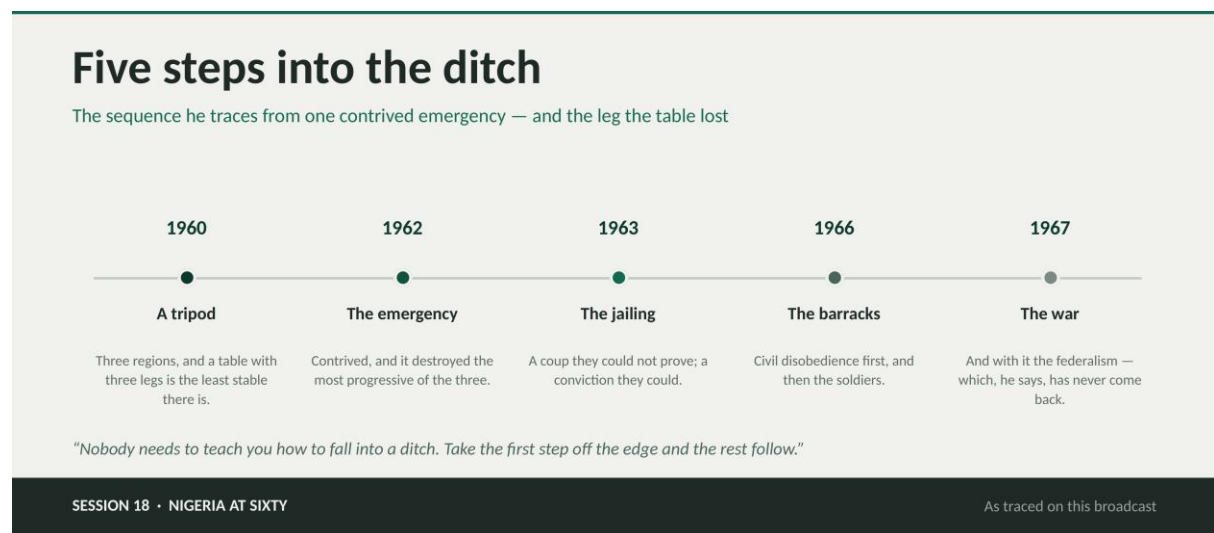
06 • THE FIRST STEP OFF THE EDGE

Asked whether there was a single moment it went wrong, he prefaces the answer with a Swahili proverb: nobody needs to teach you how to fall into a ditch — take the first step off the edge and the rest follow quickly, and you find yourself at the bottom.

The step, in his account and he acknowledges other scholars may disagree, was the contrived declaration of emergency that destroyed the Western Region, which was then the most progressive of the three. With it came the arrest of Chief Awolowo, who had just given up the premiership for the House of Representatives, on contrived charges of planning a coup — and, when that could not be proved, a conviction for treasonable felony.

The structural argument he attaches to it is the one worth carrying away, and he offers it as advice to the viewer as much as an analysis of 1962. Nigeria was built on a tripod of three regions. Never build a table on three legs: it is the least stable construction there is, because the moment anything happens to one leg the table goes over.

The rest follows in his telling as one sequence rather than a series of separate disasters. Civil disobedience after the jailing; a military coup; the civil war. And with the war, the federalism — which, he says, is the mess the country is still in.



The sequence he traces, from the first step off the edge.

07 • HOW THE 2014 CONFERENCE REACHED CONSENSUS

Asked how a conference of that composition agreed on anything, he uses the question to pay a tribute — to the late Justice Kutigi, its chairman, whom he calls a nationalist to the core: transparent, of real integrity, and alive to the need for inclusiveness in how business was conducted and how recommendations were adopted.

The mechanics he describes are candid about his own position. He was deputy chairman, and the chairman could have overruled him. What happened instead was that Kutigi recognised early that the two of them shared the same national instinct and the same view of how the grievances in the system should be redressed — and so sought his cooperation rather than his compliance. He gave a hundred per cent, and listened carefully to an older man who had seen more of the system.

The threat he names is the one that kills such bodies. The game played by people inside the system is to set one side against the other, and cantankerous figures who judged that a successful conference was against their interests tried exactly that — attempting to knock the chairman's and the deputy's heads together. It failed, because the chairman was honest and non-political and understood what the conference could contribute.

There was also a commitment behind it. Before President Jonathan agreed to convene the conference, the Professor undertook that there would be no walkout, no breakdown and no unfair games — because the President did not want a body that would blow up in his face. Minority views were respected; they were not permitted to wreck the thing.

“He was a giant of a Nigerian, and I wish he were alive to hear this tribute. That is why the conference succeeded.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi on Justice Kutigi

08 · A BASKET OF REPORTS

He rejects the suggestion that Africans hold conferences instead of acting. Better to jaw-jaw than to war-war; sitting down under the tree to talk a problem out and reach consensus is as African as the continent. And he expected implementation, because he had asked for a commitment before agreeing to take part, and had been given one.

What went wrong is specific. The architect of the conference inside the administration, the special adviser Oronto Douglas, died — a loss he compares, in its consequences, to the assassination of Murtala Muhammed. After that, people in the government who judged that a successful conference would diminish their own influence played games to derail it. He is careful to say the President himself stood firm.

But the implementation did not come, and the reason is a straightforward misjudgement of political timing. Volume one of the report set out precisely which recommendations the President could enact alone by executive order. He chose to wait until after the elections. The elections did not go as expected, and the opportunity went with them. The successor government's reaction to the report he describes as visceral, and says he still does not understand it: it would not look at it, would not touch it.

So he proposes something more modest and harder to refuse. There is not one report but several: the Uwais report on electoral reform, which he served on and which died when President Yar'Adua fell ill; the report of the 2005 conference; the 2014 report; and the governing party's own committee report on federalism. Put all of them in a basket. Appoint a task force of no more than fifty. Have them tease out, from all of it, the recommendations that could pull the country back from the brink. Call that the blue report; turn it into a white paper; take it to cabinet and then to the National Assembly — which, he notes pointedly, this President has shown he can move.

“Put all those reports in a basket. Set up a task force. Tease out what can pull Nigeria back from the brink. To ignore them and carry on — I hate to think of the consequences.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 · WHOSE INTEREST IS THE NATIONAL INTEREST?

A viewer asks whether anything in Nigeria can still be called national — any institution, including the armed forces. He treats the question as the serious one it is, and answers structurally.

The presidency is supposed to serve the national interest and to represent the totality of the nation; a president is not the president of a section, and the proof of it should be visible in appointments and in outlook. He defends the constitutional device built for exactly this: the people who wrote federal character into the constitution were not fools — they knew the mischief they were addressing, and they applied it to all national institutions, not only the presidency. He notes that even the commission meant to monitor it is itself lopsided.

Then the sentence that carries the argument, and which applies well beyond Nigeria: you cannot exclude people and then demand their patriotism. If they feel excluded, their love of country is not yours to require.

He closes with two images. A stew is not made by dropping in pepper — you decide what stew you are making and put in every ingredient it needs. And a country is not flown on sectional interests any more than a jumbo jet is flown on one engine: with four you can lose one and continue on three, but one engine and an insistence that everything is fine is asking for the impossible.

“You cannot exclude people and then demand their patriotism. If they feel excluded, you cannot demand their love for the country.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

10 • CRUDITY IS NOT STRENGTH

On the American presidential debate held two days earlier he is unusually short: disgraceful, appalling, unbecoming. He does not blame the challenger for losing his temper — being interrupted repeatedly interferes with the thought process, and he says he would have lost his own. He blames the President, for the interruptions, for disregarding the moderator, and for disregarding rules his own side had agreed.

He establishes his standing before delivering the judgement, and it is worth noting: he has followed American debates since Kennedy and Nixon, staying up through the night across a six- or seven-hour time difference to listen. Kennedy–Nixon, Reagan–Carter, Obama–McCain — great debates, conducted with civility.

The principle he draws from the contrast is the line of the evening. Crudity is not a sign of strength, and civility is not a sign of weakness.

Asked whether debates ever decide elections, he calls conclusions a hindsight activity: Kennedy is said to have won his, Reagan and Obama theirs, and yet he thought Hillary Clinton clearly won hers and the election went the other way — because of an electoral college he calls an aberration from democracy that the United States ought to find its way out of. He knows of no study showing debates move individual votes.

His practical suggestion was adopted within three weeks. Give moderators the power to cut the microphone of anyone interrupting or overrunning. The objection that moderators would then be intruding he dismisses: why are they there, if the alternative is what happened. And he contrasts the whole business with the leaders' debate in New Zealand that same period — two women, civil and mature, doing it as it is supposed to be done.

“Crudity is not a sign of strength, and civility is not a sign of weakness.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He was unhappy at eighteen that the men who won independence were not the men who governed. Sixty years on, is that a criticism of the electoral mechanism or of what the nationalists had prepared for?

- Finland pays teachers above civil servants because of what is entrusted to them. What would it cost to do that, and what is currently being spent instead?
- The tripod argument says three regions were structurally unstable. Would more regions have saved it, or was the instability in what the regions were for?
- The conference worked because two men at the top trusted each other. Is that a reproducible design, or the reason such bodies usually fail?
- He asks for a task force to distil four reports into one. What stops the fifth report from joining the other four on the shelf?

Watch Session 18 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

More analysis: tmeinsights.com · profbolajiakinyemi.com

An early broadcast with a correspondingly rough automatic transcript; quotations have been cleaned for readability — punctuation and obvious mis-transcriptions only, never sense — with the raw forms listed in the transcript header. Two dates are corrected against the record: the Queen's Nigerian visit was in early 1956, when the Professor was fourteen rather than about fifteen, and the first Kennedy–Nixon debate was in September 1960 rather than 1959. One of the eminent Nigerians in his list is unrecoverable from the audio and is left unnamed. His aside that both New Zealand party leaders were educated at Oxford is a joke and is not accurate. Sessions 13, 15 and 17 do not appear in the master spreadsheet and have not been produced.

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