Fifty Years of Political Science in Nigeria: Reflections of a Participant Observer

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I venture to hope that those who are to guide you in your various studies will themselves make a close study of the political trends and developments in this country. In any case it is a fascinating study. If teachers do not study this science - this political science - a great opportunity of mutual understanding between teachers and students is lost...

The curious thing about this particular science is that people think they know all about it without even taking the trouble to study it.... Unless you make a real study - a factual study - of the political constitution of this country and its political development, its aims, and how they are to be gained, unless you do that, your opinions are worthless - and may prove a snare and a delusion to yourselves and others who share them' (Chandos Hoskyns-Abrahall, The Chief Commissioner, Western Provinces, Nigeria, 2 February, 1948)

The above quotation is from the opening address of the Chief Commissioner at the opening of the University College, Ibadan. Mr. Chandos Hoskyns-Abrahall publicly admitted that he never attended a university and “the sacred letters B.A. or M.A. are quite unacquainted with my name”. Nevertheless, he knew the value of, and the need for the study of political science. For the “intriguing subject of politics” to be the subject of his short address at the opening of the premier university in Nigeria more than fifty-one years ago is remarkable.

Early influences in the Study of Political Science in Nigeria

Two sources of influence affected the development of political science as a discipline in Nigeria. The first was the hostility of the colonial administration. More so in political science than in the other social sciences, the colonial administrators feared
the possible radicalisation of students specialising in the discipline. It is true, as the quotation at the beginning of this paper from the Chief Commissioner of the Western Provinces shows that some administrators called for the study of the discipline. But if examined closely, what was called for was the study of constitutional development in Nigeria. 1948 was a high point in the constitutional development of Nigeria. It was a period when the new Governor of Nigeria, Macpherson was about to replace the outgoing Arthur Richards - referred to by James Coleman in his book, *Nigeria; Background to Nationalism* as a man whose “name is at the bottom of their [nationalists] popularity list”². It was a period when the unpopular Richards Constitution, which was meant to last nine years was being fearlessly attacked by the nationalists led by the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroon’s (NCNC). So, the call by the Chief Commissioner of the Western Provinces was more for the study of the Richards Constitution by the new intake of students to the premier university in Nigeria, rather than the study of political science as it was then known in the Western World.

Those of us who wrote our general certificate of education examinations in the fifties or early sixties whether at advanced level or ordinary level studied the British constitution, not comparative politics, not political theory, not international relations - not even anything that had to do with Nigeria or Africa. It will be remembered that in 1951, Margery Perham, one of the few regarded in Britain as knowledgeable on Africa, claimed that Africa had no history³. Professor Trevor-Roper of Oxford in 1963 deplored the fact that British undergraduate students “seduced, as always, by the changing breath of journalistic fashion, demand that they should be taught African History. Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none; there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness..., and darkness is not a subject of history”⁴.
History was one of the first four departments established at the University College, Ibadan, in October 1948. If the view of those who influenced colonial policy during this time was as hostile to African history as the above shows, the question of the study of political science was not an issue even to be raised. Political Science was an American invention not to be allowed to pollute the study of the British Constitution.

The second major influence was the attitude of the nationalist leaders. As Eme Awa put it, the nationalist leaders were afraid that the study of political science in universities in Nigeria would expose their class position and raise the political if not class consciousness of the common man. Even after independence, political leaders used all means to discourage the study of political science. Scholarship award was used as a deterrent. As late as 1966-67 when I was appointed assistant lecturer, recipients of scholarship awards from both state and federal governments did not include those specialising in political science. According to the University of Ibadan Faculty of the Social Sciences calendar 1968-69, “in 1961 when the Ministry of Education, Western Nigeria, excluded Economics from the list of qualifying subjects for scholarship awards, the Registrar, Mr. N. K. Adamolekun, did not hesitate to express the views of the Faculty and the University to the’Hon. Minister of Education ...” Though social science subjects, departments and faculties were already in existence at this time, the prejudices of those who formulated government policies remained until the early 1970s. Students in other disciplines registered for political science courses in reasonable numbers but very few specialized in the discipline. Political science had to be combined with history, philosophy and/or economics. At the now Obafemi Awolowo University, we started in the late 1960s a combined honours programme in political science, philosophy and economics (PPE) just to make sure that the discipline survived.
Growth of Departments

Though the University College, Ibadan, was established more than a decade before any other university in Nigeria, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) established in 1960 was the first to have a department of political science in Nigeria. The reason is obvious. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who was the brain behind the establishment of this University, studied political science in the United States. The first Vice-Chancellor of the University and the first head of the Department of Political Science were Americans. It was much later that Ibadan, Ife, and Zaria considered it necessary to follow suit and establish Departments of Political Science.

I remember that in the 1967-68 session we had in Ife only one student specialising in Political Science. The bulk of the students we taught were registered in other departments. By 1971-72, the number increased to less than ten. According to Jinadu, at the University of Lagos, enrolment for the B.Sc. (Hons.) political science degree rose from two in 1964 to forty-one in 1971, to 114 in 1978 and 124 in 1979. Zaria had ten in the 1970-71 session. This rose to thirty-three in 1975-76 and 109 in 1976-77. Similar growth in student enrolment was recorded in other departments at Nsukka and Ibadan. In short, it was not until the 1970s that political science student enrolment could be said to have grown and stabilised. The demand for political science courses by students is now unbelievable for those of us who were privileged to witness the struggle in the early days.

Unfortunately, the growth in student enrolment has not been matched by increases in staffing. At Ife in 1967-68 there were seven of us, five at the assistant lecturer grade, one lecturer grade one and one senior lecturer. Only three of these were Nigerians -Mr. Akintunde (who retired some ten or twelve years ago), Bayo Adekanye (then Bayo Adekson) and myself. By 1970-71, R. Ayo Akindele joined the staff, after obtaining his doctorate degree in
International Relations from Canada. I returned in September 1971 from Pittsburgh after completing my doctorate degree. Two years earlier, an elderly Indian professor of political science was employed to head the department. Altogether, the number of staff did not increase appreciably. At Ibadan, there were problems in the late sixties about staffing, to the extent that some of the newspapers published in Ibadan questioned the quality of the programme in political science due mainly to the number of academic staff available to teach the courses. The non-Nigerians at Ibadan moved almost en-masse to ABU and other countries. The situation at Ife and Ibadan was similar to that in other departments of political science in the other universities at Nsukka and Lagos. Zaria appeared to be the only exception with academic staff strength of twenty-one during the period 1972-74.

With the establishment of more universities, more departments of political science have also been established. Today, as at July 1999, of the thirty-eight universities in Nigeria, only the few specialist universities of technology and agriculture do not have departments of political science. Enrolment figures remain high but the problem of inadequate number of academic staff persists. I remember returning to Ife in the late 1970s from Ibadan as an external examiner. One of the students that were to graduate that year had a first class, with distinctions in every subject that he offered. I was so impressed with the performance that I told the then head of department, Ayo Akindele, that I wanted to see the student. When he arrived I asked what arrangements he had made for his graduate work. His reply: “I do not plan to go to graduate school. I have been interviewed by the United African Company (UAC) and if offered a job, that is where I would be next year. I do not plan to be a university teacher of political science. I cannot afford to be as poor as my lecturers!” To put it mildly, I was shocked, but then I understood what he was talking about. Those of us who have stayed on this job for thirty-three years know that if it is money you are interested in, you better find another job. But
there is in this job something that money cannot buy, something that, depending on your preferences, is more valuable than money - freedom to do what you want to do.

Let me move to what Jinadu has called the curricula preoccupation of departments of political science in Nigeria. As I observed above, in the area of curriculum development, considerable influence came from the Western world and in particular the United States of America whose political scientists, like other social scientists, began to move out to other parts of the world after the second world war in search of general theories of politics. In addition, from the late fifties, the United States became attractive to students from Nigeria. One of the reasons that led to this was the expansion in education in Nigeria and the absence of opportunity for a good number of ambitious students to get admitted to the then only university in Nigeria. Much of what was taught in the early days of political science in Nigeria emphasised order, stability and reconciliation, and much of it dealt with Britain, France and the United States of America. Very little or nothing was taught on Nigeria or Africa. It was not until the mid-sixties that courses that emphasised contradictions and conflict became attractive. The early entry of the military into African politics soon after independence and in particular the coups of 1966 and the civil war of July 1967 to January 1970 in Nigeria opened our eyes to the need to understand contradictions and conflict. I remember in Ife between 1968 and 1972 when some of us called for the need to introduce courses on the military, there was a great debate on whether the issue was not just a passing phenomenon in Nigeria’s political development. This type of debate and the unfolding of events around us in Nigeria and other parts of Africa resulted in a slight shift in the curricula of political science departments.

Expansion in the number of departments of political science in Nigeria occurred from the 1970s in particular. The shift in the curricula of the departments and the influence of oil revenue
on this and other areas of life in Nigeria resulted in the unprecedented demand for programmes in political science and other social sciences. Graduate programmes were introduced in many departments. Undergraduate programmes could hardly meet the demand of student enrolment. The three-year programme introduced because of the influence of British academics that dominated decision-making in the departments gave way to a four-year programme copied from the United States. In the early days, departments and faculties determined how many students to admit into their political science programmes. With the stranglehold of the National Universities Commission (NUC) which became all powerful, with its executive secretary functioning as the Vice-Chancellor of Vice-Chancellors, things changed. NUC dictated admission quotas as well as course to be offered. Flexibility in the introduction of new courses became history. The introduction of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) added to the loss of control of admission to political science programmes and expansion of these programmes. It is only in the graduate programmes that departments of political science now control both admissions and expansion of programmes.

Unlike in other departments of political science, Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) and Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) have other departments that teach one or two areas of political science. The reason for this is mainly historical. The Institute of Administration at the Kongo Campus of ABU was very well known ahead of its department of political science. The University of Pittsburgh had considerable influence from the late 1960s to the early 1970s on the development of the programmes at the Kongo campus of ABU. In the late 1970s when the federal military government decided to introduce university-level teaching of local government for serving local government officers, this area of the discipline was expanded considerably. Apart from the department of local government, two other departments have been established to teach other specialisations in the discipline. At the Obafemi
Awolowo University, the former Institute of Administration became the faculty of administration with three departments in the discipline - departments of public administration, local government and international relations. Most other departments of political science have resisted the breaking up the discipline. At Nsukka, there is a sub-department of public administration and local government. This was established in 1978 as a result of the federal military government’s decision to establish three departments of local government at ABU, OAU, and UNN. The debate on whether or not public administration as a different discipline appears to have died. Overwhelming majority of departments of political science in Nigeria have the different areas of specialisation -political theory, comparative politics, public administration and international relations - within the same department, simply called department of political science, or department of political science and public administration.

**Pioneers in the Teaching of Political Science**

As I observed above, non-Nigerians dominated the teaching of political science at the beginning. These included James O’Connell who served as acting head of the subdepartment of political science at the University of Ibadan from 1960-63 and later as head of department at ABU, J. E. Black who served as the substantive head of Ibadan’s department of political science 1963-65 when that department was fully established; J. P. Mackintosh who later became a member of parliament in Britain and wrote the well known work - *Nigerian Government and Politics* in 1966; K. W. J. Post who was mainly at the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER) and wrote the pioneering work in that area, *The Nigerian Federal Election of 1959*; Richard Sklar, the author of the classic work, titled *Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation*, first published in 1963.

To the best of my knowledge, Kalu Ezera was the first holder of a doctorate degree in political science from Oxford. F. O.
Onipede received his doctorate from an American University. He graduated B.A. (Syracuse) M.A., Ph.D. (Columbia) in 1958. When Onipede returned to Nigeria, there was no department of political science at the only university in Nigeria. Kalu Ezera’s book, *Constitutional Development of Nigeria*, is even today being read. The others who were the early teachers or researchers in the discipline worked at the University College Ibadan Extra Mural Studies Department. Onipede first became a high school teacher before he joined the department of political science in Lagos in 1967. Other Nigerians who have made their mark are E. U. Essien-Udom who was head, Department of Political Science at Ibadan 1965 to 1972; Erne Awa, who was first at the Extra-Mural Department at Ibadan, then moved to the University of Lagos and finally became head of the department at University of Nigeria; B. J. Dudley, initially of Ibadan’s Extra-Mural Department, who was head of the department of political science at U. I. from 1972 to 78 and was elected the first President of the Nigerian Political Science Association (NPSA) in 1973. Others joined them from the late 1960s. It was not until the mid-1970s that Nigerians took over full control of departments of political science in Nigerian Universities.

An Association for Political Scientists Credit should be given to Omo Omoruyi for initiating the establishment of the Nigerian Political Science Association. In 1972, Omoruyi sent round a proposal to departments of political science across the country in Ibadan, Nsukka, Ife, Lagos, and Zaria making a case for the establishment of a political science association. This resulted in a meeting held at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan in 1973. It was at this meeting that B. J. Dudley was elected president of the association with Eme Awa as his vice president and Omoruyi as the secretary.

In 1974, the meeting of the association was held at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Dudley had indicated that he would
not be available for a second term. The assumption was that Erne Awa would take over the leadership of the Association. 1974 was an important year in the political development of Nigeria and the Association. Gowon in 1970 had told Nigerians and the world that 1976 would be the year to return to civilian rule in Nigeria. In 1974 he reversed himself amidst all the propaganda that what was important was not who ruled but the nature of rule. The theme of the NFS A conference was “Whither Nigeria 1976?” Shortly before the conference, a newspaper published in Benin indicated that Erne Awa was fully in support of continuation of the Gowon regime beyond 1976. This was rejected by a large number of the members of the NFS A. The hostility to Erne Awa was shown by members at UNN during the conference to the extent that when it was time to elect new officers, the majority of members voted for Babs Williams, head, department of political science, University of Lagos. It was long after the conference that members began to understand that what the Benin paper carried on Erne Awa was false. The manipulators of military propaganda were at work. Fortunately, the hostility to Erne Awa did not dampen his support for the Association and its activities. He was present at most annual meetings. In 1991 when he was about seventy years old, he gave the Third Annual Lecture of the NPSA. His support for the Association still continues. Let me, on behalf of members of our association who attended the 1974 conference, publicly apologise to Erne Awa for the damage done to his name by those Dudley called “official experts... and their clients who prescribed a ‘One Party State for Nigeria”!

Political Scientists and Political Regimes in Nigeria

Like other intellectuals, Nigerian political scientists have historically played a vital role in the choice and design of democracy. As I observed elsewhere, before and more particularly since independence, we have had a strong say, though not the last say, on this issue. However, there has been a serious dilemma
within’ the circle of leading political scientists over which ideological path is most suitable for the growth of a democratic political culture in Nigeria. There is a second dilemma: engagement or detachment in the political and social life of the country. The second dilemma arises from two possible sources: fear that once involved, we may realize that we are unable to exert real influence or even may become mere sycophants of the real power ‘holders, and the fear of “ideological pollution” or “corruption”. A third and probably most important dilemma is whether leading political scientists should abandon ship or continue their calling in the midst of substantially declining standards of living and a worsening academic environment. I consider the third dilemma to be the most serious because it is a pointer to the intellectual survival and growth of the discipline\textsuperscript{12}. The discussion of this will be taken up in the final section.

I cannot elaborate on the other two types of dilemma here. However, it is necessary to briefly touch on them. Let me take the second dilemma first. Jinadu, in his “Democracy and intellectual responsibility: the case of political science in Nigeria”\textsuperscript{13}, distinguishes between “responsibility to and for the pursuit and defence of truth and the conditions that make them possible” and “political and social responsibility”. While the former has to do with “respect for as well as commitment and adherence to the canonical rules of scholarship and intellectual traditions”, the other “is essentially identical with political involvement., with coming out of ‘laboratories and libraries’”.

It is the second sense of intellectual responsibility that I wish to discuss here. While Kalu Ezera was a lecturer at the department of political science in Ibadan, he was also a member of a political party and of the national legislature\textsuperscript{14} long before independence in 1960. The number of those who got involved at this stage was very limited mainly because the number that was available was very limited as well. After independence and more particularly with the militarisation of political power in Nigeria
and the improvement in the number of Nigerian political scientists, more got involved not necessarily in seeking elective political office, but more in serving in one capacity or the other to achieve a democratic agenda. Erne Awa groups the arena in which we have served into four (15). The first is training, socialisation and mobilization. This includes our activities in such agencies as the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), the Administrative Staff College of Nigeria (ASCON), the Centre for Democratic Studies (CDS), the National Centre for Economic Management and Administration (NCEMA), the Commission for the Mobilisation of the People (MAMSER), the National Electoral Commission (NEC) and the Foreign Affairs Academy. There were those who served as advisers/assistants to heads of states or their deputies, ministers etc, whether as members of the kitchen or official cabinet. This group constitutes the second arena of service. Those who were involved in administrative and constitutional reforms such as Political Bureau, CDC, Dasuki Committee on Local Government etc constitute the third group. Finally are those who held or are holding executive positions as chairmen of parastatals, such as Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, (NIIA), NEC, or Secretary to Government.

Those who played or are playing these roles are representing the profession but they are not and have not been representative of the profession. They are chosen in their individual capacity. This is why in the good old days of the NPSA, the association, even when government funded its annual conference, did not shirk its responsibility to be critical of government policies. As I said elsewhere, the NPSA was often critical of government policies up until the early 1990s and “sometimes radical in its prescriptions, notwithstanding the strategic positions that some senior members hold in the services of military administrations that have ruled Nigeria."
The ideological dilemma was more prominent up until about the early 1990s. Permit me to quote what I said six years ago.

Differences among Nigerian intellectuals over how to structure and conceptualize democracy go beyond the liberal-socialist debate. The sad experience of Nigeria in the practice of liberal democracy and its failure ... has predictably filled some intellectuals with cynicism about liberal democracy. Some have even gone as far as openly advocating a one-party, or even zero-party, system, however unpopular that may be in the 1990s worldwide. Side by side with this authoritarian tendency have been the recent calls for corporate representation or what Bangura calls the “corporate democracy” which became popular among intellectuals of the left, as a substitute for liberal democracy\textsuperscript{17}.

Let me conclude this section by emphasizing that though Nigerian political scientists differ sharply on the type of democracy best suited to our nation, they agree on the minimum environmental conditions for the proper growth of their varied conceptions - freedom of thought, of association/assembly, and of speech.

**Future of Political Science and Political Scientists in Nigeria**

I wish to state categorically that I am not very optimistic. This leads me to examine the third dilemma which I raised earlier - the dilemma of whether leading political scientists should abandon ship or continue their calling in the midst of substantially declining standards of living and a worsening academic environment. I realise that this is not a dilemma peculiar to political scientists but common to all scholars.

Of those with whom I started the teaching of political science thirty-three or so years ago, I can name only Bayo Adekanye as the only one still teaching. A few have retired, like Erne Awa, after a glorious and fruitful career. Others who are yet
to reach retiring age have moved to more lucrative enterprises like various type of consultancy etc. Long before some of those in the latter group retired, they stopped attending annual meetings of the NPSA. These are people who at one time or the other led the association as president. The exceptions that I can recall are AH Yahaya and Sam Oyovbaire who until a couple of years ago attended NPSA meetings long after their presidency. This behaviour of past leaders appears to have left the association in the hands of those with vaulting ambitions without any idea of what it takes to lead such a group. During the inglorious years of Abacha, the association met only once!

The academic environment in Nigerian universities has been most oppressive in the last two decades. Government policies on higher education have been uncaring and, what is worse, leaders of academic institutions, except in very few cases, have made the situation almost unbearable. More often than not, more harm is done to university lecturers by the action of their leaders than by government policies. Unless a critical examination of the internal and external environment of university education is improved, the future looks gloomy. It is not only that those who are in it may leave for greener pastures in greater number than before, the likelihood of recruiting the best material to replace those who are leaving is slim. The silver lining at this moment is the return of civilian government in the country. Hopefully, at the minimum, those who understand the value of higher education will be in charge of government policies rather than those who think that professorship can be attained outside the university campuses.

This leads me to the strangle-hold of the National Universities Commission (NUC) and the Joint Admissions Matriculation Board. I am of the view that the usefulness of these centralising bodies has been exhausted. It is high time that we returned to more decentralisation of power and decision making in Nigerian universities. Unless this is done, and very quickly too, the future of university education in Nigeria is not very bright. NUC
still has a hangover from the colonial and early independence days, particularly about political science being regarded as a subversive discipline to be kept under control. Except at the graduate level, much of what we are allowed to teach is determined by NUC. Why should all political science departments in the country be directed to teach similar courses? This is not imaginative.

Let me end on a slightly positive note. There is a growing realisation among the younger teachers of political science who were influenced by Claude Ake when he first returned to join the fold in the mid-seventies that political economy and the dependency paradigm need to be washed off its Marxist coloration to be meaningful and illuminating. Political reality can only be partially explained by theories. To think that only those who use the Marxist political economy approach, particularly when this is not properly understood, are the real political scientists is to live in a fool’s paradise

Notes


2. J. Coleman, Nigeria: Background to Nationalism, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1971 p. 275. This work was first Published in 1958.


6. It should be noted, however, that public administration was being taught at institutes attached to the University of Ife and Ahmadu Bello University from the early 1960s. This specialization was regarded as tolerable or acceptable.


8. Ibid p. 258.

9. Kalu Ezera’s Dissertation was Published as *Constitutional Development in Nigeria*.

10. It was not until the late 1970s that Claude Ake returned to make his contribution to political science in Nigeria. His plan was to join the department at Ibadan. When he wrote to Billy Dudley of his plan, he was correctly informed that Professors are not appointed from outside in the faculty. The best he could be offered was a senior lectureship. Claude was angry. He wrote to tell Dudley that he feared competition that was why he did not want him. After Claude got to Port Harcourt, he realised that Ibadan was yet to shed its British colonial mentality in respect of appointment to the highest academic position in political science. Claude duly apologised to Billy Dudley.
11. Dudley was to travel to Tanzania at the time of the conference. He showed me the draft of his presidential address. My advice was that he had to get in touch with the Department of Political Science in Tanzania to change his date of arrival so that it would not be said that he ran away because he was not bold enough to personally read his address. He took my advice and personally delivered his address. See address in Oyeleye Oyediran (ed.) *Governance and Development in Nigeria: Essays in Honour of Professor B. J. Dudley*, Ibadan: Oyediran Consults International, 1996, Chapter Seven.


14. He was not alone. Other Intellectuals who were both Lecturers and Political Activists included Okoi Arikpo and Chike Obi.

15. For details of who held what position, see Erne Awa, *op. cit.*
