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# **A Pioneer Female Historian of Oral History and Women's Studies in Nigeria**

## **Interview with Professor Bolanle Awe**

Mutiati Titilope Oladejo and Sara Panata

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### **Abstract**

This interview features Professor Bolanle Awe, a pioneer female historian of Oral History and Women's Studies in Nigeria. Professor Bolanle Awe looks back at her training as a historian and at some episodes in her academic career. Born in 1933 in Ilesha, a secondary town in South-Western Nigeria, she trained as a historian in the British metropole and taught in Nigeria from 1964 on. This conversation provides a glimpse into the professional trajectory of a woman from the Nigerian intelligentsia whose career as a historian spanned the history of the country from the late colonial period until 1998. This memoir of an exceptional academic trajectory also highlights the reluctant attitude of the largely white British academic community towards students from the colonies as well as the challenges of being a woman in Nigeria academia.

**Keywords:** Gender Studies, Women's History, Nigeria, Nigerian Historiography, Bolanle Awe



## Introduction

**B**olanle Awe, born Fajembola, has been referred to as “The Matriarch of Feminist History” in Nigeria<sup>1</sup>. She specialised in Nigerian history, but she is mostly remembered as a pioneer historian of Nigerian women’s history. She also produced prominent research on oral history and historical methodology. Born in Ilesha in 1933, she received her MA in History at the University of Saint Andrews in Scotland in 1958 and pursued her Ph.D. at Oxford University (1958-1964)<sup>2</sup>. After completing her Ph.D., she taught History at the University of Ibadan (1964-1966) and subsequently at the University of Lagos (1966-1973). In 1973, she was the first woman to be appointed director of the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ibadan.

Although she obtained her doctoral degree in Britain, her historical approaches and methods were profoundly influenced by the pioneer environment of the Ibadan School of History at the University College of Ibadan (subsequently University of Ibadan)<sup>3</sup>. In 1954, Professor Kenneth O. Dike, also known as “The Father of West African Historiography”<sup>4</sup>, was the first African to be appointed Professor of History at the University College of Ibadan. Dike played a crucial role in the decolonisation of African History and the writing of African History by African scholars when he established the Nigerian Records Office in Ibadan (1954), which later became the Nigerian National Archives. Furthermore, the History Department at the University of Ibadan progressively employed Nigerian scholars like Joseph Anene, Jacob Festus Ade Ajayi and Ade Aderibigbe. They worked together towards a radical reform of the history curriculum, which became centred on African and Nigerian history, and produced textbooks to be used at different levels of the education system. They also promoted ground-breaking research on precolonial Nigerian History based on oral sources.

Bolanle Awe was particularly interested in oral history methodology to advocate for an African history that moved beyond the history of Europeans in Africa, largely documented by written sources<sup>5</sup>. Her Ph.D. was centred on the military history of Ibadan State in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She based her research on a wide body of oral sources and she consequently wrote different essays on the importance of these different forms of oral materials. She also produced major works on Nigerian women’s history<sup>6</sup> challenging male dominance in African historiography and the monopoly on African women’s historiography by foreign scholars<sup>7</sup>.

On the one hand, she strongly criticised the absence of women’s accounts in the writing of African history. She pointed out the absence of women from the well-known *UNESCO General History of Africa*, challenging the androcentrism of African history, which was dominated by male scholars and oblivious to the roles played by African women in their own history<sup>8</sup>.

On the other hand, she was part of the first generation of African women scholars to strongly criticise Western scholars’ hegemony on women’s studies. After her 1976 experience at the international conference on Women and Development held at Wellesley College in Boston, she questioned the so-called universality of women’s experiences, interests and objectives and argued that African women should be studied on their own terms and not within the constructs of Western historiography<sup>9</sup>. She also encouraged African women scholars to write on women in Africa following their own themes, instead of being too influenced by foreign scholars and institutions. “While

<sup>1</sup> Falola Toyin, “Celebrating Bolanle Awe: The Matriarch of Feminist History”, *The Punch Nigeria*, 9 November 2018. On Bolanle Awe’s contributions to Oral History and Women’s Studies see also: Agbaje Adesola Adetutu (1995), “Bolanle Alake Awe: a Biography”, MA thesis, University of Ibadan, Isiugo-Abanihe Ifeoma et al. (dir.), *Bolanle Awe: Portrait of an Academic and Activist* (1999), Ibadan, Women’s Research and Documentation Centre; Aderinto Saheed and Falola Toyin (2010) “Bolanle Awe. Yoruba and Gender Studies”, in *Nigeria, Nationalism, and Writing History*, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, pp. 142-56.

<sup>2</sup> Awe Bolanle (1964), *The Rise of Ibadan as a Yoruba Power in the Nineteenth Century*, Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford University.

<sup>3</sup> Aderinto S. and Falola T. (2010) *Nigeria, Nationalism... op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Feltham Forbes Jacob, “How a King’s History Student Founded a School of Historical Thought in 1950s Africa”, *King’s College London, Spotlight on Research*, 11 October 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Awe B., *The Rise of Ibadan, op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> For her first piece on female institutions see Awe B. (1977), “The Iyalode in the Traditional Yoruba Political System”, in A. Schlegel (dir.), *Sexual Stratification: A Cross-Cultural View*, New-York, Columbia University Press, pp.144-59.

<sup>7</sup> Awe Bolanle et alii (1991), “Editorial”, *Signs*, 16(4), pp. 645-49.

<sup>8</sup> Awe Bolanle (1991), “Writing Women into History: The Nigerian Experience”, in Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson, et Jane Rendall (dir.), *Writing Women’s History: International Perspectives*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 211-220.

<sup>9</sup> Awe Bolanle (1977), « Reflections on the Conference on Women and Development: I », *Signs*, vol. 3, no 1, pp. 314-316.

the observations of the foreign researcher can be useful” – she pointed out in 1977 – “the time has now come when emphasis should be on indigenous scholars; by virtue of their permanent membership in their society they are likely to have a better insight into its problems and the areas that need closest attention.”<sup>10</sup>

In this regard, from the 1970s onwards, she produced several biographical works of influential African women, and she emphasised the political roles played by African women in African history<sup>11</sup>. She was indeed the first African historian to extensively write about Nigerian women’s history<sup>12</sup>. Her research reversed the then conventional image of the “eternally submissive African woman” by showing the concrete possibility for African women to exercise positions of power and control. These criticisms were taken up and developed in the 1980s/1990s, by groundbreaking research on women’s and gender studies in Nigeria, such as Amadiume Ifi’s and Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí’s works, addressing the “eurocentrism” of gender studies and the need to produce “local knowledge” in this field. Her contribution to the integration of African women is a cornerstone of the national historiography of Nigeria and her research was crucial to the renewal of African women’s studies.

Aside from her own research, she also played a key role in promoting the writing of African women's history by African scholars based in Nigeria. At the end of 1986, she and other colleagues from different disciplines established the Women’s Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC) at the University of Ibadan. WORDOC aimed at collecting research findings on women in Nigeria and at serving as a national database for Nigerian scholars interested in women’s history<sup>13</sup>. She was the first chairperson of WORDOC and she was active in promoting local and national research on women and creating an international network among scholars of the discipline.

Awe also held positions in the public administration of the Oyo State Government in the 1970s and was involved in women's associations throughout her academic career: from 1970 to 1973, she was a member of the National Council of Women's Societies (established in 1957) and the national secretary of the Nigerian Association of University Women (established in 1964). In the 1980s, she withdrew from these national organisations, but continued her activism in other networks: she was the national coordinator of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), a transnational feminist network founded in India in 1984. From 1990 to 1992 she was head of the National Commission for Women, based in Abuja<sup>14</sup>. She retired in 1998.

The interview was carried out at her residence in Ibadan in June 2021. The transcript was then proofread by Bolanle Awe herself. Even though she was given questions ahead of the interview, she preferred to talk at length about her life history. That is the reason why we are adding subheadings in order to guide the reader.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 315.

<sup>11</sup> Awe Bolanle (1988), “Nigerian Women’s Visions and Movements: An Overview”, a paper presented at DAWN’s Africa Regional Meeting on Food, Debt Crises in Relation to Women, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan; Awe Bolanle (1992) (dir.), *Nigerian Women. A Historical Perspective*, Ibadan, Bookcraft; Awe Bolanle (1992), “Women and popular participation”, paper presented at COWAN/WORDOC Second Stage Workshop on Women and Popular Participation, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan; Ashaye Yomi Leon and Bolanle Awe (2016), *Nigerian Women Pioneers and Icons*, Ibadan, Childsplay Books Limited.

<sup>12</sup> During the 1970s and the 1980s, the other four major scholars of Nigerian women’s history were foreign scholars based in Nigeria (Nina Mba, LaRey Denzer) or abroad (Kristin Mann, Judith Van Allen).

<sup>13</sup> Awe Bolanle and Mba Nina (1991), “Women’s Research and Documentation Centre (Nigeria)”, *Signs* 16(4), pp. 859-64.

<sup>14</sup> Panata Sara (2020), *Le Nigeria en mouvement(s): la place des mouvements féminins et féministes dans les luttes socio-politiques nationales (1944-1994)*, Ph.D. dissertation, Paris, University of Paris 1.

## **Becoming a Historian in the Colonial Period (1954-1964)**

### ***Mutiat Oladejo: May we start with you giving us some brief biographical information?***

I am in my 80s now. I was born in Ilesha [South-West Nigeria] in 1933. I started primary school in Ilesha (Holy Trinity School) but had to complete it in Ibadan when my father was transferred. At St. James Primary School in Ibadan, I took the entrance exam to St. Anne's School, the first girls school in Ibadan. We were the very first set to graduate from there, we were 10 or 12 of us.

From Ibadan, I moved to Lagos, and then I went to a public school, Perse School in Cambridge, to study for Advanced Level in preparation to go to the University. Of course, I went to the university – I went to St. Andrews University, in Scotland in 1954 and then I went to Oxford University from 1958 to 1964. I came back to Nigeria, to teach, first in the University of Ibadan, and later in the University of Lagos.

My mother was a trained teacher and one of the very first women trained teachers in Nigeria then. There were about 12 of them and they were trained in Ibadan. My father was a businessman. His father was a cocoa trader. And he was asked by a cocoa trader-friend to send one of his children to school, and my father was chosen. He went to one of these public schools in England but unfortunately, his father died before he could finish school. So he had to come back home. And he started working in Osogbo [South-West Nigeria] in a company called John Holt. It's a big English company<sup>15</sup>. And there he met my mother and they got married in Ilesha.

### ***Sara Panata: How did you come to the profession? What was it that led you to become a historian?***

It was from St. Anne that I decided I wanted to go abroad to read History. I was a bit arrogant when I got to the school because I had very good results, I must say. When the headmistress asked, "What do you want to do later?" I said: "Well, I want more. I am going to either Oxford or Cambridge to carry out my Ph.D. Nowhere else". And she looked at me and said: "Nobody in this school has been to Oxford or Cambridge before now. There is no room for you". And she said that they couldn't even take me, that what she would advise is that I should go home and be a teacher. In the first instance, go to a teacher's training college abroad, train as a teacher, go back home and teach and get married, and go back later to go to a college or university. I was so depressed.

And then I decided to go to the Colonial Office. There were two women who were in charge of women's affairs. I went to see them and they said that the best thing to do is to go to a school where I can do A-levels. And that is how I got to the Perse School for Girls, one of the A-Levels schools in Cambridge. I was quite excited being there and they were excited also to have me. However, there were reports that I couldn't measure up. The principal of the school took it upon herself to teach me grammatical English. And it is from her that I learned about "shall" and "will" and all that. They also taught me a little bit about sport in this school. Every seventh week, they took me to the cricket field, to show me how people played cricket. And they also sent me to a school to improve my English. They said my English wasn't good enough. They had an English speaking school where they teach people eloquent English. And I went there.

Anyhow, the interesting thing was my two history teachers – I had two history teachers: one in English, one in European History. They were extremely nice. And the one in English was extremely excited about me and he used to ask me all sorts of questions, particularly about British history. Like: "How do you feel about the queen becoming the head of the state? A woman becoming the head of the state?" and all that. And the other one taught me European History and made me go to Italy to look at the artworks in Italy. Yeah! So, they gave me a lot of encouragement. From there, you can go on to the university, from that school. However, it was difficult because there were only two women's colleges in Cambridge and five women's colleges in Oxford. So, when the result came, what the headmistress used to do was to read out the names of those who passed and went to either of those two universities. Those who didn't get admission, she never mentioned them. And when it came to my turn, she said: "Would you go to London?" So, I said: "No!", I didn't like London. I decided that I would go to St. Andrews, in Scotland. It's a long way from Cambridge. It's a long way from everywhere else. It's a small university in a small

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<sup>15</sup> This English company was implanted in Lagos in 1897.

town. It's a town for retirees. Anyhow, I went to the University and there was a hall of residence where I stayed and the hall of residence wasn't too far from the university campus.

Since I've been learning History in Cambridge in the past, I just opted to read History. I had lecturers and professors in History. I particularly remember the one in Modern History and the one in Medieval History... they were extremely kind, they were nice; very encouraging and very good teachers. I liked them. The one who did Medieval History, Professor Lionel Harry Butler, was extremely popular: both of them went to Oxford.

Anyhow, we had a lovely time there. It was a beautiful place to study in. Very beautiful, it's by the sea. We were all expected to wear our gowns for lectures – red gowns. And it was a very nice environment. So, when I finished, I said that I wanted to do postgraduate work. Both professors said: "Yes, you must go to Oxford". They decided that and they wrote references for me and I went to Oxford. So that is how I got to Somerville College Oxford, a women's college.

## Doing a Ph.D. in England as a Nigerian woman

When I arrived at Somerville College Oxford, the lecturer in History had to interview me. And she interviewed me and said: "What would you like to do?". I said "History". She said "Yes, but what type of history?". And I said, "African History". She said, "There is nothing like African History". And I replied "Yes, there is". She told me: "There is nothing like African history. What is available is the history of Europeans in Africa". If I want to know about the history of Europeans in Africa, they would encourage me to do that but there was nothing like African history. I insisted that there was an African history. It was around that time that Professor Saburi Biobaku<sup>16</sup> and Professor Kenneth Dike<sup>17</sup> brought out their books on African history and I had read them. So, I was confident that there was an African history. So, she said: "Well, if you cannot do what I want you to do, that is the History of Europeans in Africa, then we can't take you". Bye bye. So, I opted out. And I said: "Well, if the worst comes to worst, I can always go to London where they teach African History".

But the following day, the principal of the college summoned me and said she wanted to see me. When I got there, she said "Sit down". So, I sat down. She said, "Well, we thought about your case and we were quite impressed by the fact that you stood by your guns, that you refused to be forced to change your mind. Since you are so determined, we want you to come to Somerville College and prove that there is African history. So it is on that basis that we would take you". I was shocked. She said, "Yes, you would be surprised that when we talked about you, we just thought that you have the guts to keep on arguing, and we thought, well, let's see what you would make out of this." So that is how I became a member of Somerville College. I wanted to prove that there is African history. And I did my Ph.D. on the history of Ibadan<sup>18</sup>.

My supervisor was Ms Margery Freda Perham<sup>19</sup>. She was a fellow of Nuffield College, which is another college in Oxford. She was a very tall domineering woman, a very nice woman. She had about eight of us who were her students. And she was also a consultant to a number of countries. Tafawa Balewa [a Nigerian politician], all sorts of these people used to come to her to seek advice. She was a consultant to the Colonial Office. She was also, at the same time, writing the biography of Lord Lugard. So, whenever you come to be advised by her, she would just say: "Oh, you are here, here is a chapter". She would give a chapter of Lord Lugard's book that she was writing. She would say: "Go and read that and give me your comments". We were always doing that. Then, one of her colleagues, a man, asked me what I was doing, and I said that I was doing nothing: "Ms Perham is not teaching. She is only giving us chapters of Lord Lugard's book and that's not what I came for. I wanted to do the history of Ibadan." So, they told her and the next time I saw her, she said: "Look, I see that you have been talking about me. You said that I have not been teaching you?" And I said: "Ms Perham, you haven't been teaching us. You have just been asking us to read Lord Lugard's book and that's not what I came for". She said: "You are a naughty girl. Now I would start supervising you. But if you are coming for supervision, you must put on your academic gown". It is

<sup>16</sup> He was a foremost professor of History in Nigeria and a former Vice-Chancellor, University of Lagos. Biobaku Saburi O. (1960), *The Origin of the Yoruba*, Lagos, Federal Information Service.

<sup>17</sup> Dike Kenneth O. (1965), *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*, Oxford, Clarendon.

<sup>18</sup> Awe B., *The Rise of Ibadan*, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Perham Margery Freda (1962), *Native Administration in Nigeria*, London, Oxford University Press; Perham Margery Freda (1963) (dir.), *Ten Africans*, London, Faber and Faber.

the academic gown in Oxford that you would put on when you are coming for classes, supervisions, lectures and everything – “if you don’t come with that, I would not supervise you”. And she had a sister who came from Kenya, she was a very good cooker. She makes sure that she gives me breakfast before we start the lectures.

Prof. Vincent Todd Harlow was the one in charge of the classes. He was an English historian<sup>20</sup>. But Prof. Harlow didn’t have much faith in a lot of us from the Commonwealth, especially those of us from Africa. And it was then, in 1963, that the English historian Hugh Trevor-Roper gave a lecture affirming that there is no African history. All there is, is the history of Europe and the history of Europeans in Africa and the rest is blank<sup>21</sup>.

Prof. Harlow allowed us to sit in his class. But I think he felt that we were just wasting our time. But there was a very brilliant guy from Ghana. He got a First Class in University of Ghana and he was one of us. And we used to take turns to read papers and it was his turn to read the paper. I think that’s the first time an African was reading a paper in that class. And he read this paper. Normally, after one had finished reading a paper, Prof. Harlow would then make comments and ask for comments. But this time, he didn’t make any comment, he didn’t ask for any comments. There was just silence in the class. After some time, he then said: “If there are no comments, the class can go”. That there is no comment. It was the most depressing thing because it was more of saying: this Ghanaian had nothing to offer. We were so depressed because we thought that he was one of the best in class. Anyhow, we had all sorts of experiences...

Then, I came home, to Nigeria, for fieldwork. I went to a lot of places. Professor Biobaku was the director of the Yoruba Historical Research Scheme at that time<sup>22</sup>. He took me with him all over Western Nigeria – which I didn’t know that much. Another Professor helped me: Prof. Ade Ajayi. He used to take my thesis chapters and read and comment on them until I sent the chapters to Oxford.

Once I was done with the writing process, then I sent the manuscript to Oxford. Then I went for the defence in Oxford. I was interviewed by some of the dons and that was how I got my degree. Though Ms Perham was very annoyed that I didn’t tell her before coming to Oxford, that she wasn’t among the people who examined me. She said that it was as if they were junior to her, that such people should not be examining her students. But that is her own problem. Anyhow, I got the degree.

## **Being a Female Historian in Nigeria (since 1964)**

***Mutiat Oladejo: You then came back from Oxford in 1964 and you settled in Ibadan. You were appointed Professor of Oral History at the History Department, University of Ibadan. We were wondering if you might reflect a little bit on these years with us.***

It was tough teaching in the History Department because I hadn’t done too much African History. And here I was to teach in the History Department which was already famous for African History. That was where Kenneth Dike was, and Prof. Joseph Christopher Anene<sup>23</sup> was, that was where Professor J.F. Ade Ajayi<sup>24</sup> was. Tekena Nitonye

<sup>20</sup> Professor Harlow was previously Kenneth Dike’s supervisor in King’s College London.

<sup>21</sup> “Undergraduates, seduced, as always, by the changing breath of journalistic fashion, demand that they should be taught the history of black Africa. Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness, like the history of pre-European, pre-Columbian America. And darkness is not a subject for history.” In Trevor-Roper Hugh (1963), “The Rise of Christian Europe”, *The Listener*, p. 871.

<sup>22</sup> The *Yoruba Historical Research Scheme* was launched in 1956 by the former Western Regional Government with the aim of “writing an authentic history” of the Yoruba from the pre-colonial period. Historians involved in the project paid strong attention to different sources from which the history of Yoruba can be studied. The Scheme was directed by Saburi O. Biobaku. The results of the project are assembled and discussed in Biobaku Saburi O. (1973), *Sources of Yoruba History*, Clarendon Press.

<sup>23</sup> J. C. Anene firstly worked on the imperial history of Africa to then focus on the effects of colonialism on political institutions and social organisation of Southern Nigerians. Anene Joseph Christopher (1966), *Southern Nigeria in Transition, 1885-1906*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Anene Joseph Christopher (1970), *The International Boundaries of Nigeria, 1885-1960*, London, Longman.

<sup>24</sup> J.F. Ade Ajayi is considered the doyen of Nigerian history. He pioneered in the fields of Christian mission studies and Yoruba History. Throughout his career, he has been an advocate for the continuities of African institutions under colonialism instead of focus on agents of change and disruption. Ajayi J.-F. Ade and Smith Robert Sellers (1971), *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Ajayi J.-F. Ade (1981), *Christian Missions in Nigeria 1841-1891: The Making of a New Elite*, London, Longman.

Tamuno<sup>25</sup> too was in the same Department. So also was Prof. Obaro Ikime<sup>26</sup> and Prof. Emmanuel Ayankanmi Ayandele<sup>27</sup>. A number of distinguished people were already there. Prof. Abdullahi Smith from the North - he was an Englishman but very nice<sup>28</sup> - knew that I was very weak in African History. So, he suggested that it would help if I sit at the back of his class. He was teaching the postgraduate students. He said: "If you like, you can come and sit at the back of the class". By doing that, I picked up and picked up good information.

Well, that had its own problem. The students felt that this woman can't really be a qualified historian if she's sitting in class with other students. And at that time, I was given a flat in the university and I used to walk from the faculty to that place. And some of these students will come and walk with me, just to see how well I can talk and so on... just to see if I was really a true historian or not. Especially as I didn't also have a car. Most of the lecturers had cars but I just felt that my house is so near, why should I need a car? And I was already thinking of getting married and my husband had a car. I thought that should be enough.

## **Relationships with Male Colleagues in the Department of History**

The thing about teaching history then was that, it was the time that I finished my Ph.D. itself.

Prof. Anene was the head of the History Department then, and I had a brush with him. We taught the most senior classes to critically use different sources for the writing of history. Anene decided who would supervise the students. And three of us, Ajayi, Ayandele and myself, were all in the same field doing Yoruba history. But Anene then decided to ask Ayandele to supervise this class of students and Ayandele was the most junior of the three of us and Ajayi was not particularly interested. I felt slighted that I was bypassed by Ayandele. So, I went to Anene. And I said: "Look, I am senior to this guy. Why did you give this guy this responsibility which I should have taken?" But he looked at me and said: "Look, you are wasting your time. Don't you know that you are a woman? That you can't compete with a man here? You don't expect that you will go at the same pace as a man".

I was very upset. I went home and I told my husband. I decided that I will write a letter to Prof. Dike who had become the Vice-Chancellor to tell him that there is discrimination in my department and possibly in the University of Ibadan but I thought the constitution says that there should be no discrimination. That we are all equal. Dike didn't reply to my letter but I think he called Anene and spoke to him, because after that, Anene called me and said that he was only joking with me. "When he said that, I didn't know that you would take it seriously" I said that: "I *have to* take that seriously. And after that, we never became friends until he left the Department, during the civil war. He was an Igbo man. That was the time also that I went to Lagos because my husband had gone to Lagos. You know that was the time when Biobaku was the Vice-Chancellor of Lagos and they nearly killed him around 1964.

### **Sara Panata: How many women were teaching in the Department of History at that time?**

I was the only one. I was the only one, but I didn't think there was anything strange in it at all. And there weren't too many girls either. But there weren't too many of us even in the university itself. I remember there was a time when I was in the housing allocation committee, that committee used to give marks for you as a member in the university for your housing but they would not give it to women. It was said that when you have a husband, your husband would look after you. I remember I went to see the registrar to complain and he said, "What are you complaining about? You better go and beg your husband so that he makes sure he gives you" But I was on one of this housing allocation committee, I was the only woman there and I spoke. And I thought that I convinced them they should also give women points. Yes. I was the only female on the housing committee and they agreed that

<sup>25</sup> T. N. Tamuno was appointed as Lecturer in the Department of History in 1963. He attained prominence as a historian of administrative and political history of the country. He also tried to transform the academic format and to write for the wider public. Tamuno T.N. (1972), *The Evolution of the Nigerian State the Southern Phase, 1898-1914*, London, Longman.

<sup>26</sup> Obaro Ikime taught History at the University of Ibadan from 1964 to 1990. He is known for his analysis on intergroups relations in Nigeria and was also responsible for the publication of numerous works on the Nigerian past. Ikime Obaro (2001), *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan, Heinemann Educational Books.

<sup>27</sup> E. A. Ayandele is known for his works on Christian missions in Nigeria and their socio-economic and political impacts. He taught History at the University of Ibadan from 1963 to 1983.

<sup>28</sup> He founded the History Department at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria. He moved to the Department of History, University of Ibadan in 1955.



they were going to allocate points for women members of staff but unfortunately, the next meeting they had, I wasn't there and they cancelled that decision. But we had another association which is for all very senior members of staff. We had some of the most senior female professors all there as members. Well, when I came to that meeting, we were raising that same point and Prof. Geoghegan, one of the female professors said she was going to raise the motion and I would second it. I was the youngest. And we just allowed that. I seconded the motion, and that gave me a lot of confidence because people were looking at me and saying: "Who is she? Who is she?" But I was able to second Professor Geoghegan's motion.

**Mutiat Oladejo: In 1966, you moved to the University of Lagos. Could you narrate this experience?**

I remember one thing about Lagos: we were made to teach the students General African Studies and a lot of it had to do with history. And all students had to do General African Studies. If you don't pass that subject, you don't get your degree and the students hate it. Because, whether you are reading medicine, law, or whatever, you must pass that subject. They used to be so unruly and unpleasant, and I had to start the course. There was a day I decided that I must find a way of getting attention from them. So, there was a day, I don't know if you have heard of James Brown?<sup>29</sup> "I am Black and I'm Proud." So, one day I came into the class and I said, which of you knows "I am Black and I'm Proud." So, they said "Yes." So, I said "Let's sing it." So, the whole class started singing "I'm Black and I'm Proud." They were dancing, they were... the whole class! So, after some time, I said: "Stop! What are you black and proud of?" So, I looked at them and they looked at one another... And then, they kept quiet. And I said, look, what we are trying to teach you is what you should be black and proud of. So, you better listen. And after that, they were quite attentive.

**Sara Panata: In 1983-1991, you became the first female director of the Institute of African Studies. How was it?**

Well, I don't know how I became the director but it is something that goes one after the other, it's not just something that you walk into. The last director before me was Prof. Biobaku. I became the director after him. But to become a director, you have to earn it. On becoming a director, you would do a lot of teaching, you asked people to do a lot of teaching. You have to be aware of the Institute programmers, the teaching, the various areas of interest and how you would develop those areas. The Institute of African Studies was unusual. It was a special unit of the university. And it was quite some time before the university agreed to make it into a special teaching unit. First of all, it was just thought to be a unit where researchers from different departments can come and work, and go back to their department. But after some time, it was decided that it can be a unit on its own. And it was with that that we had a director of the Institute.

This next phase of my life was a very challenging one. Because when it became an Institute – a unit of its own – we had to make it special, make people realise that this is an African unit where a lot of the emphasis would be on African culture and history – and African culture, African way of life. And it was then the time when we opened a museum in the Institute. It was the time when we also had the craft village – where we invited craftsmen from all over Nigeria to come and exhibit their work, and explain what they do. And it was when we celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Institute... It was not easy.

**Establishing WORDOC (1986)**

It was a period when we discussed the issue of women. It coincided with the time when internationally a lot of emphasis was given on women. It's not just women's studies, but all over the world, we were discussing the issue of women. And we felt that we should also recognise this. We did our own. So, the Institute had an interest in that, and a number of us in the Institute decided that we would help to build a unit which is to do with women. That's how that came about. And we had support from so many people. Some multinational organisations gave us support and a lot of people came to the Institute to see what we were doing. We used to have lectures regularly. We used to have people, not only from the Institute but from the other departments in the university. Women used to come, gave support and presented papers. And we had a unit made up of women, not only from the

<sup>29</sup> James Brown, "Say it loud - I'm Black and I'm Proud", song released in August 1968.

Institute but from different parts of the university: the women group, where we used to have meetings and decide on the programmes that we should have in the Institute. It is what we call the Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC). We had lectures with students and we had some very distinguished women to give lectures. I also spread the word to other departments in the university. Not only there but also outside the university to other places.

**Sara Panata: How was it considered by your male colleagues?**

I think they just accepted it. I think they just felt that the women were doing their things. I didn't get the impression that they felt that we were overstepping our bounds. I don't think so.

**Mutiati Oladejo: What you might see as being your legacy and your major contribution to the discipline of History and Women's Studies?**

Well, first of all, the fact that I taught history from the very-very beginning as a young woman and I kept on teaching it, and the fact that I was involved in all the activities that have to do with women. I went to almost all the conferences that had to do with women. And I encouraged people to do the same. I think I made people realise that it is important that they know about the discipline of history, that they should not just leave it to the men alone. And that, it is important to have noteworthy information on the activities of women. And honestly, that's what women's studies should be about. And how we could become part and parcel of the society.

Women must learn about our past, to be able to understand our future. They should learn about the fact that they could also be achievers like anybody else... The history of various women should show that... that you can achieve!

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