

Profile

Akin Ogundiran: The Historian and Archaeologist of Yoruba-Atlantic becomes Chancellor Professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte

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I am pleased to share the good news that Professor Akin Ogundiran has been named Chancellor's Professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. This distinguished title is a university-wide honor reserved for a full professor who has attained outstanding scholarly achievement in a professional field, and excelled in interdisciplinary research, teaching, and service in more than one department or college. He is the third professor in the university's history to attain this distinguished rank—<https://provost.uncc.edu/news/2019-10-28/ogundiran-receives-chancellors-professor-designation>

Professor Ogundiran has always been as exceptional as he was promising. He was a graduate of Obafemi Awolowo University where he bagged BA in Archaeology (First Class Honors) in 1988. This is where and when our interactions began, and that was where we sensed he was a student who would be greater than his teachers. We are proud of him, as one of the best students produced by Ife. He earned his M.Sc. in archaeology from the University of Ibadan in 1990. Ten years later, he received his doctorate in archaeology from Boston University. Within eight years, he became a professor of History and a major pillar in African Studies. In my book, *The African Diaspora: Slavery, Modernity and Globalization*, I devoted Chapter 10 to his oeuvre, stating in one of the key paragraphs that:

In connecting West Africa to the Atlantic economy, Ogundiran is pointing to what could be characterized as the metabolic rift between supply and demand; African economies were on the supply side of the global division of labor that compelled them to produce for the Atlantic economy and, at the same time, to consume products from external sources. This division of labor, and the productive mechanism unleashed by the demand side, ultimately had implications for all aspects of institutions. Ogundiran has to grapple not only with the meaning of local history, but also with the definition of the world in which the local is situated against the background of rapidly changing events. And if, as he treats the local, he engages in issues around production and trade—as all his objects indicate—he is forced to engage in the understanding of how society relates to nature: that is, how humans ultimately relate to their environments, using and destroying them at the same time, and sometimes renewing them as well.

Ogundiran's career span ranged from journalism to the academics. He taught at three universities between 1989 and 1993: Ambrose Alli University (then Bendel State University), Delta State University, and the University of Benin, in their respective Departments of History. He also had a stint as a news editor and journalist at the Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State, both in the radio and television divisions. After his doctoral degree, he accepted the appointment of Assistant Professor of History at Florida International University in 2001 where he earned tenure and promotion to the rank of Associate Professor within five years. He also served as Director of the African New World Studies. He moved to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in 2008 as Chair of the Africana Studies Department and Professor of Africana Studies, Anthropology + History.

As a distinguished scholar, Ogundiran has devoted his career to working at the intersections of many disciplines: history, archaeology, folklore, geography, ethnography, and geochemistry. His collaboration with many experts has made this possible. He has particularly used his transdisciplinary training and interests to explore many aspects of Yoruba history from the 12th century to the present. He launched several archaeology projects from the central Yoruba and Edo regions to the Yoruba northwest to answer questions on regional interactions, the birth of societies, and the impacts of globalization on social formations, as well as the sociology and political economy of Yoruba cities, kingdoms, and empires. As a result of these studies, he developed the first and only comprehensive chronological framework for Yoruba history, covering more than a thousand years. He also made the stunning discovery of an ancient town buried under the canopies of Osun Grove, a Nigerian national monument of a UNESCO World Heritage site. Two years ago, he led

the archaeological team that identified the ancient city of Bara where the remains of the past Alaafin of Oyo were buried between ca. 1615 and 1830. This last discovery is part of his long-term research on the archaeology and history of the Oyo Empire.

A tireless fieldworker, he has described himself as an archaeologist who is interested in local history in order to have a better understanding of global history. He said, "Much of what we know today about world history and the place of Africa in it must be revised based on the original research that we archaeologists are doing. Every day, we bring something new to the historical archive that challenges popular knowledge of the past." He has been a strong advocate that the model of history education that Africa inherited from Europe must be set aside for a new interdisciplinary method. In an influential keynote address that he delivered in 2011 at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, he called for a new curriculum of history that will include archaeologists, historians, and other scholars, from sociology to philosophy and art history. According to him:

We will need to return to the kind of eclectic methodologies that the late Professor Saburi Biobaku and his collaborators outlined in *Sources of Yoruba History* nearly 40 years ago... We need in our departments of history, not only people who can use the colonial archives to write colonial-era history, but also archaeologists, historical linguists, historical anthropologists, art historians, ethnographers, etc., who can interdisciplinarily interrogate our precolonial history. I say, for any university in Nigeria to be a major player as a fountain of consciousness, we must pull down the walls that separate history and archaeology. As long as these walls exist, we will continue to copy Western historiography, and Western archaeology. Let us pull down this wall that divides our labor into miniscule fragments, and liberate ourselves from the silos of colonial construction of history. It is time to reconfigure a new humanistic curriculum that will enable us to develop a liberating paradigm of culture and history.

Ogundiran has his boots on the ground, not only in the field but also in the classroom. His passion to mentor a new generation of scholars in interdisciplinary studies of history and archaeology led to his appointment as a Visiting Professor of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Ibadan where he mentors graduate students in field research methods and social theories. He is also an External Examiner in the Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies at Dar es Salaam University, Tanzania for archaeology postgraduate studies, and a Graduate Supervisor of African History at The University of Bonn, Germany. He has also held a visiting appointment at the University of

Cambridge and has been selected to serve on the advisory committee of the Shanghai Archaeology Forum in China.

Ogundiran's scholarship extends to the diaspora where he has explored the impacts of modernity, capitalism, and the slave trade on the creation of Africa's Atlantic culture, cultural continuities between Africa and the Americas, and the trajectories of Yoruba cultural legacies in the Atlantic world. Ogundiran's research has been supported by several institutions including the Carnegie Foundation, Social Science Research Council, Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, National Endowment for the Humanities, the Boston Humanities Foundation, and American Philosophical Society. He was also a National Humanities Fellow and a University of Cambridge Yip Fellow. His work has been anthologized in multiple entries including the *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*. In July 2014, he delivered the high profile keynote address at the Joint 14th Congress of the Pan-African Archaeological Association of Prehistory and Related Studies and 22nd Biennial Meeting of the Society of Africanist Archaeologists at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, titled "Collapsing Boundaries: A Continental Vision for African Archaeology."

Ogundiran is an author/editor/co-editor of several publications including *Archaeology and History in Ilare District, Nigeria* (Cambridge Monograph in African Archaeology, 2002), *Precolonial Nigeria: Essays in Honor of Toyin Falola* (African World Press, 2005), *Power and Landscape in Atlantic West Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), and *Materialities of Ritual in the Black Atlantic* (Indiana University Press, 2014) which received a Choice Outstanding award. His articles, reviews, and essays have also appeared in *African Archaeological Review*, *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa*, *Journal of African Archaeology*, *Historical Archaeology*, *American Historical Review*, *Journal of World Prehistory*, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, *International Journal of Cultural Property*, *Current Anthropology*, *African Studies Review*, *English Historical Review*, *Economic Anthropology*, and *History in Africa*, among others.

He is a highly-respected scholar among his colleagues. Commenting on his transdisciplinary scholarship, Nancy Gutierrez, Dean of UNC Charlotte's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences said: "The impact of Professor Ogundiran's research stems from the themes of human society and behavior that he explores through archaeology, history, and geography. These characteristics make Professor Ogundiran's research truly transcendent, not just across academic disciplines, but also through the entire human experience." Provost Joan Lorden, the provost and chief academic officer at UNC Charlotte also describes Ogundiran as "an internationally recognized scholar whose contributions to the university and to the highly interdisciplinary fields of Africana

studies, anthropology, history, and the arts define what it means to be a Chancellor's Professor." Ogundiran is currently the editor of *African Archaeological Review* and was a co-founder of *Yoruba Studies Review*.

As an academic administrator, Ogundiran served for twelve consecutive years in the position of a program director and department chair respectively (2006-2018). Under his leadership, the Department of Africana Studies at UNC Charlotte tripled its undergraduate enrollment in the major, added more than 20 new courses to the curriculum, developed an Africana honors program, launched African language courses in Swahili and Yoruba, created a concentration in health and environment within the Africana Studies major, and launched the graduate certificate in Africana Studies. He also created a university and community-linked annual lecture titled Dr. Bertha Maxwell-Roddey Distinguished Lecture, named after the founding chair of the department. He initiated and collaborated with the College of Arts and Architecture to launch the annual Africana Artist-in-Residence program. He also developed a wide range of community partnership projects that promote Africana knowledge systems, history, and culture in the Greater Charlotte area. His community partnership works in Miami and Charlotte have earned him accolades and honors such as a letter of commendation from former Congressman Mel Watt and a Certificate of Special Congressional Recognition for Community Service.

Ogundiran enjoys reminding everyone about his Ibadan roots. He is particularly fond of his early childhood in the inner city of Ibadan, in Ojagbo-Aremo-Ode-Aje axis. He recalled his childhood in a recent interview:

It was a cosmopolitan environment, with a diversity of interests – Muslims, Christians, Orisa devotees, etc. Very early on, I realized that the elders around me paid attention to history, stories, things, and places in the way they solved problems, negotiated differences, managed conflicts, and organized towards a common goal. This was the background that shaped my unconscious orientation. Maybe, my interest in the study of history began with immersion into that kind of environment. <https://africa.wisc.edu/africa-in-our-lives-akin-ogundiran/>

It turns out that our natal compound is the same: Ojà'gbó, at Ibandan. Let me recite, in his praise the collective city praise poem, as recently modified and randered by Ìyá'Bàdàn, to save for another moment of glory, that of our compound where we worship Šàngó, the god of thunder:

*Ìbàdàn mesì ọ̀gò, nílẹ̀ Olúyọ̀lẹ̀
Ìlẹ̀ Ọ̀gúnmọ̀lá, olódògbo kẹ̀rì lójú ogun*

Ìlú Ìbíkúnlé alágbàlá jáyà-jayà
Ìlú Àjàyí, ò gbórí eḡḡn ṣe filàfilà
Ìlú Látòòsà, Ààrẹ-òṅà kakaṅfò
ibàdàn ọmọ ajòro sùn
Ọmọ a jẹgbín yó, fi ikarahun fọ̀ri mu
Ìbàdàn májà-májà bíi tojọ kinníní, èyí tó ja aládugbòò gbogbo lógun,
Ìbàdàn kí í bá ni ṣọrẹ̀ àì mu ni lọ sógun
Ìbàdàn Kùrè!
Ìbàdàn kí o tó wọ̀ o
Níbi olè gbé n jàre olóhun
B' Ìbàdàn ti n gbonilé bẹ̀ ló n gbàjòjì,
Èlẹ̀yẹ̀lé lomi tí tẹ̀rú-ṭọmọ̀ 'Láyípo n mu,
Aṣẹ̀jìrẹ̀ lomi àbùmu-bùwẹ̀ nílẹ̀ Ìbàdàn
A kí í wáyé ká má lárùn kan lára, ijà igboro làrùn Ìbàdàn

What about the translation? Let me give the task to Akin, Baba 'Beji, our distinguished and famous historian and archaeologist. This is his first assignment in this new position!¹

If his Ibadan upbringing prompted his interest in the study of history and archaeology, then Ogundiran has long expanded his provincial roots from Ibadan across the Atlantic and deposited knowledge in archives around the globe. As he assumes this new title, we can only wish him many decades of outstanding scholarly achievements, community engagements, and global impact. Akin has used his intellect and brilliance to become my senior. I bow to this great man.

Ìbàdàn that know the right answer for a fool, in the home of Olúyọ̀lé,
 The residence of Ògúnmọ́lá, the fiercest one in battle.
 The home of Ìbíkúnlé, the one with an intimidating compound.
 The home of Àjàyí, the one who decapitated buffalo in one stroke.
 The home of Látòòsà, the Generalissimo.
 Ìbàdàn that dine on òro for dinner.
 Ìbàdàn eat sails to satisfaction and use snail shells as plates to eat cornmeal
 Ìbàdàn that was begged to restrain from war, but recalcitrant until he fights
 all
 her neighbors in battle.
 Ìbàdàn who will only make friendship for the purpose of war.

1 Thanks to Gabriel Ayoola of the Department of Comparative Literatures, University of Georgia at Athens for providing the translation of the praise poetry at the end of the profile.

Ìbàdàn of Kùrè

You must enquire before you venture into the business of Ìbàdàn.

Ìbàdàn where the thief is discharged and acquitted; where the owner is accused.

Ìbàdàn favors both her citizens and the foreigners.

Ìbàdàn, the offspring of Láyípo, where they drink from the Èlẹ̀yẹ̀lé River.

While they bathe in Aṣẹ̀jirẹ̀ River

Everyone has a weakness, Ìbàdàn's weakness is public brawl.