

## Conference Review

# Toyin Falola@65 Conference: African Knowledges and Alternative Futures

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### Defining Experiences

A defining moment for me at the Toyin Falola@65 Conference titled “African Knowledges and Alternative Futures” that ran from the 29th to the 31st of January 2018 at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, was the declaration at a paper presentation session by a scholar from a Nigerian university that the culture of making promotion of Nigerian academics dependent on publication in journals outside Nigeria, particularly from the West, is ultimately counter-productive to the development of a robust academic culture in Nigeria. “Do US or British academics, for example, have to publish in Nigerian journals?” he asked.

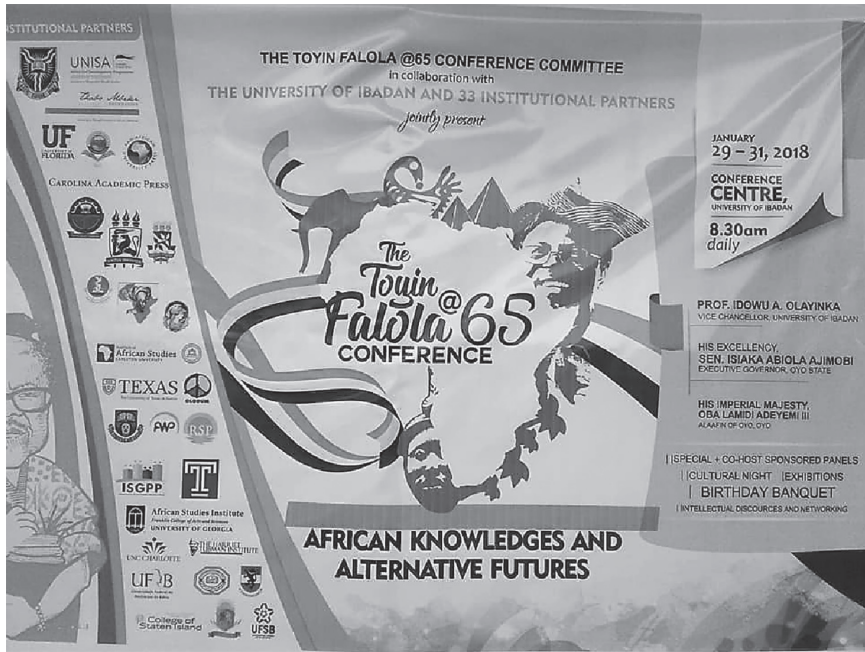
This loaded question is at the heart of the challenges and paradoxes provoked by the conference.

Another definitive encounter for me was another presenter’s outlining of the concept of an African, as different from an Asian or a Western epistemology or way of arriving at relating to knowledge.

Yet another was Emmanuel Ofuasia’s explanation of what he describes as the Yoruba origin Ifa knowledge system’s anticipating of deconstructivist hermeneutics centuries before the development of this post-modern scholarly phenomenon in the West.

Complementing these occurrences is yet another represented by Dr. Joan Ugo Mbagwu expounding on indigenous methods of conflict resolution and countering terrorism in Africa.

I shall use these encounters as pivots in exploring the significance of the conference in the body of this essay.



## Conference Poster

Framing the entire universe of discourse I was exposed to at the conference, from scintillating books on display in different disciplines, to various formal and informal discussions to the festivities represented by pageantry, food and dance, was the symbolic contextualisation of the event by the symbolism of the conference poster, drawing on central evocators of the classical African achievement, in tandem with imagery suggesting the expansion of scholarship in Africa through the colonialists' introduction of printed texts to the continent, juxtaposed with a colourful array of logos being the insignia of the various organisations who contributed to making the conference possible, the entire visual feast of the poster suggesting the character of this conference as a gathering of Africans and non-Africans, from Europe and the Americas, coming together to investigate Africa's place in the global configuration of knowledge, of knowledge as abstract inspiration and its potential for practical application.

The conference poster projected Falola's scholarly range and vocational flexibility in terms of symbols constituting a map of Africa in which was embedded a triumphant portrait of the scholar. The poster also evoked the institutional reach of his influence through a global listing of sponsors of the conference through their logos as well as stating the royal and academic figures and personages from the Oyo state government, the state of which

Ibadan is the capital, who were to grace the conference, excluding the name of Rauf Aregbesola, governor of Osun State, who officiated at the opening ceremony on the 29th, perhaps because the poster went to press before his presence was confirmed.

At the top of this visual configuration was an image of a bird looking back over its elegantly displayed tail feathers. That is the Sankofa symbol of the Ghanaian origin Adinkra system of knowledge, in which philosophical ideas are expressed through visual symbols. The bird represents the need to critically examine the past in order to better appreciate the present and the future. It thereby dramatizes the exploration of the deposit of knowledge represented by classical African thought, in tandem with other bodies of knowledge, represented by Falola's pluralistic epistemology.

The Sankofa symbol also evokes his vocation as an historian, a student of the past and its relationship to the present, particularly one who integrates the study of the historiography, conceptions of the nature of history and of how it may be studied, developed in classical African cultures, with historiographic thought from other cultures, such as that made available in the Western academy, from Herodotus to Carr and beyond, evoking foundational figures in Western historiography from ancient Greece to the twentieth century, from the Yoruba distinction between forms of knowledge represented by *imo*, knowledge and *gbabo*, hearsay, and therefore of the basis for ascribing factuality to historical accounts reflected in Yoruba conceptions of *itàn*, narrative, and the griotic traditions of Guinea mediated through the recitation of the griot Babu Conde presented by Camara Laye in *Guardians of the Word*, among other ideas and traditions from Africa and the world.

To the right of the Sankofa symbol was a representation of the majestic forms of the pyramids of Egypt, visualizing one of the greatest feats of imagination and engineering ever constructed, its mode of creation, at such a level of perfection and grandeur still a mystery.

To the left of the Sankofa bird was an abstract form that may evoke a camel, a primary means of transport in North Africa, thus suggesting the traffic of populations through which ideas, creativity and other possibilities move across Africa and between Africa and the world.

Shaping the bottom of the image was a portrait from Nigeria's Ife, representing a sculptural form that is famous as one of humanity's most powerful depictions of the human face, one of its most sublime evocations of idealized humanity.

Thus, the image at the centre of the conference poster dramatizes Toyin Falola's mobility of subjects, of disciplines and of geography as he grapples with exploring and configuring Africa through his scholarship.

### **Conference Vision**

The conference aspired to “critically interrogate the state of knowledge production in Africa, and to review the state of cumulative knowledge about Africa”.

Its ultimate goal was to contribute to building pluriversalist frameworks in the development of knowledge. Pluriversality is a term foregrounded by Toyin Falola in urging the creation of multiple centres of epistemic authority to replace the current dominance of Western thought as the one universal knowledge platform. In the process of achieving this goal, the conference also sought to better situate, in the world of scholarship, and in the larger field of experience as a whole, the work of Falola, an encyclopaedic scholar in the continuum between classical and contemporary African existence in its various expressions across the humanities and social sciences.

Falola’s scholarly oeuvre is long and deep, resonating with such African syntheses of encyclopaedic knowledge as the 256 odu ifa, an effort to account for all possibilities of existence, as one view understands them, projecting this aspiration through a multidisciplinary integration of knowledge correlating literature, mathematics, herbalogy, spirituality, philosophy sculpture and ancillary disciplines.

The conference resonated with this disciplinary breadth that shapes Falola’s oeuvre, a breadth that dramatizes an effort to engage with every area of knowledge in which the African experience may be explored.

African literature and African philosophy, for example, are well established disciplines. To what degree, however, do African ways of knowing shape the vision and curricula of African educational institutions? Is the current educational system not imported largely wholesale from Europe? To what degree do cognitive platforms created in the context of Africa’s distinctive cognitive history structure the epistemic strategies and metaphysical orientations of any discipline? Are these questions a form of counter-nativism, replicating Eurocentric thought with an equally short sighted Afrocentrism in a world where access to a plurality of cultural perspectives is readily available? Should the aspiration, therefore, not be for a pluriversality of perspectives not the uncritical privileging of any viewpoint, to adapt Falola’s ideas in his essay “Pluriversalism”?

### **Constructing Pluriversalism**

Mosigbodi Bamidele Amuda is able to declare in “Inertia Citizens in Africa: Taking Lessons from Confucianism and Ifa”, her paper at the conference, that “Africa cannot continue to dwell in the grandiose delusion that all it needs to bring about development are ideas from within”, arguing that

colonialism has opened up an unprecedented opportunity for global synthesis, harmonising the local and the distant to illuminate the immediate within the matrix of the cognitive and social convergences that define humanity. Thus Amuda invokes the Chinese philosophical school, Confucianism, in dialogue with Ifa, in exploring the responsibility of citizens, complementing leaders, for good government, a great challenge in a continent where the led are too often manipulated or bullied into propping up a corrupt elite.

Emmanuel Ofuasia's philosophical interests range from the history and philosophy of physics to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger to conjunctions between the Yoruba origin Ifa system and process philosophy, in which the British/US philosopher A.N Whitehead is dominant. From within this disciplinary matrix, he addresses Ifa, as demonstrated by his paper at the conference on Ifa as a precursor of deconstructivist hermeneutics which has its origins in the writings of the French scholar, Jacques Derrida.

Oghenekevwe Jibromah's "Interpreting the Urhobo Indigenous Knowledge System in the light of Western Education" argues that the incorporation of such indigenous knowledge into the Western education dominant in Nigeria will enhance cultural continuity, transferring knowledge into the next generation.

These papers, among others, bring home for me the distance this movement has travelled from its earlier days in the assertion, within academic contexts, of the existence of African literature, African philosophy and pre-colonial African history and historiography, and the emphasis on local centered African art represented, among others by Nigeria's Zaria Rebels, students at the University of Zaria who began the process in academic art schools of drawing from the local environment in creating art, an initiative that enabled the indigenisation of modern African art, some of its greatest work being a synthesis of classical and Western inspired art practices.

### **The Conference as Convergence of Complementary Contraries**

The conference was a magnificent experience in which scholarship and royalty converged in a pageant that invoked the secular authorities into their midst, generating a confluence of scholars, secular politics and classical monarchy in a disciplined riot of colour and sound, a celebration situating the indefatigable labours of the scholar being celebrated within the nexus constituted by the totality of human experience.

The conference consisted in intense celebrations alongside a festival of knowledge represented by scholarly presentations and discussions in a range of disciplines by scholars from different parts of the world. Food was

abundant. The sartorial splendour displayed unforgettable. The cultural effervescence magnificent. The festivities were both public and intimate, outdoor and indoor, intellectual and musical, embracing deeply felt speech and rich dancing, profoundly projecting Yoruba culture as well as being international in resonance.

The experience was wonderful, from the trip with some other participants from my Lagos base to the conference venue at the University of Ibadan, to energizing minds with various people who converged from Sweden to the US, from South Africa to Nigeria, to enable this encounter of persons and creative possibilities, to the welcoming reception in his hotel room by Toyin Falola on the day before the conference, to taking a night walk through the magnificent University of Ibadan campus, reflecting on its incidental evocation of the focus of this scholarly and cultural explosion to the movement between passionate scholarly presentations and the royal pageantry dramatized by the presence of the Alaafin of Oyo, to the cinematic delight represented by the film show that concluded the first day.

### **Royal Pageantry : The Arrival of the Alaafin of Oyo, His Royal Majesty Oba Lamidi Adeyemi III**

A climatic point of the festivities was the arrival of the Alaafin of Oyo, His Royal Majesty Oba Lamidi Adeyemi III, on the second day of the conference. It was an unforgettable demonstration of Yoruba verbal art, Yoruba music and the Yoruba mastery of dramatic interpersonal protocols, the sheer veneration of the monarchy even within the largely symbolic role of the traditional institution created by the post-classical Nigerian state mobilizing these Yoruba cultural forms to a high level.

The Alaafin's movement from one place to another, his arrival at the conference venue and taking his seat, even his later rising to go to the rest room and return to the conference hall from the rest room were major events celebrated by the fantastic oriki chanter who accompanied him, oriki being a Yoruba verbal art crafted to galvanize the addressee's sense of self, their awareness of their achievements and potential, dramatizing the creative continuity represented by the person's family history, the convergence of the eternal essence of self and the terrestrial identity of the human being in the person's passage through the world, those verbalizations saluting, to "ki", the "ori", the correlative aspects of human identity symbolised by the biological centrality of the head.

These hermeneutic possibilities were actualised through sonorous diction in the mellifluously stentorian voice of the Alaafin's chanter, using a

loudspeaker even at close range of the Alaafin as if to suggest a magnificence of person and of office that unmagnified speech is inadequate to project.

The rhythmic saluting of the oriki chanter was punctuated by the rhythm of the Alaafin's horn blower, short blasts between chants that added another level of power to the running celebratory commentary of the tireless chanting.

### **The Indefatigable Conference Organisers**

Four figures, beyond whom are many more, were at the centre of the planning and execution that made possible this combination of scholarship and cultural effervescence.

The Chairman Local Conference Organising Committee was the indefatigable Dr. Adeshina Afolayan, Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, who met, in Lagos, participants coming in from abroad and from Lagos and organized our movement to Ibadan. He demonstrated the dynamism of a meteor as well as a being who can enter all corners to ferret out what was needed to be done to actualize this awesome conference congregating various institutions and individuals, academic and non-academic, from across the world.

The remarkable Dr. Samuel Oloruntoba, Thabo Mbeki Leadership Institute, University of South Africa, visionary and genius of commitment, was Convenor-General of the conference, veteran of conference organisation across continents.

The restlessly dynamic Dr. Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso, Babcock University, Director of Conference Administration, assumed all roles as necessary, from conference secretary to catering organiser and dispenser, visible everywhere, could not be pinned down anywhere as she migrated at speed between locations and responsibilities. She multi-tasked between organising food for delegates as well as working on conference logistics, among other responsibilities.

Wale Ghazal was Director of Conference Logistics. Where Falola is, there he is, Ghazal's busy, mobile presence making sure the great scholar's multifarious itinerary across continents goes smoothly.

### **Questions of Relative Independence and Interdependence of Scholarly Ecologies and Traditions Emerging from the Conference**

The declaration at a paper presentation session by a scholar from a Nigerian university that the culture of making promotion of Nigerian academics, particularly at the higher levels, dependent on publication in journals outside Nigeria, particularly from the West, as ultimately counterproductive to the development of a robust academic culture in Nigeria, evokes the challenges

and paradoxes provoked by the conference, foregrounded by the conference title “African Knowledges and Alternative Futures”.

The requirement to publish internationally, often another term for publishing in the West, is described as a means of ensuring the international accreditation vital to academia as a trans-national and trans-continental enterprise. A laudable vision, which, however, exists in the face of serious contradictions, as suggested by that conference presenter, contradictions that foreground the challenges of epistemic dependence and interdependence of Africa in relation to the rest of the world, particularly in relation to the dominance of the West, a subject at the core of the conference, stated in the conference’s mission statement, as exploring “the global politics of knowledge production” by critically interrogating “the state of knowledge production in Africa and [re-viewing] the state of cumulative knowledge about Africa” through asking these, among other questions :

“What makes alternative knowledge systems possible? How can new knowledge manifestoes be produced? How will cultural imperialism be demolished? Must Africa be bound by the logic of neoliberal capitalism? Must globalization be a one-sided Western agenda?”

Albert Einstein’s three *annus mirabilis* “miracle year” papers of 1905, one of which was central to transforming the world view of physics and has remained a landmark of thought in its development of the matter/energy equivalence theory, encapsulated in the world famous equation  $e=mc^2$ , were published in *Annalen Der Physique*, a German journal, Germany being a close neighbour of Switzerland, where Einstein lived at the time, a publication geography that suggests the integration of European scholarship that is a great strength of Western academia.

As Paulin Hountondji so poignantly summed up in his essays from the 1990s, scholarship in Africa and scholarship about Africa is often oriented towards the epistemic and economic centres, the metropolises represented by the global North, the privileged zones of development and validation of this scholarship. The exodus of many African scholars to the West following the brain drain of the 80s as painfully summed up by, among other sources, Jeremiah Arowosegbe’s “African Scholars, African Studies and Knowledge Production in Africa” (*Africa* 86 (2) 2016: 324–38 ) and Toyin Falola’s *The Toyin Falola Reader (2018)* makes the Western academy, particularly the US, the most visible source for scholarship on Africa, a context in which the economics of scholarship have taken a serious beating in Africa, due to the effects of the World bank advised Structural Adjustment Program and other factors that enabled and consolidated this situation.

What that conference presenter was suggesting are questions of the implications of such an unequal balance of power and the challenge of changing



that balance. What are the implications of having much of a continent's own intellectual production validated by people from other continents and cultures? Is the task at stake that of reaching independence, as Western thought and academic scholarship is largely if not totally independent of other scholarly cultures while those of other continents outside Europe and North America are often dependent to a greater or lesser degree on Western academic scholarship and its support systems, such as its universities and publishing houses?

Is the challenge that of interdependence? On what grounds would scholars in Asia, South America and other parts of the global South, along with Western scholars, need the validation of scholars in Africa as the South now often operates in terms of such Western validation?

So much has been written on challenging factors external and internal to the African university system and external and internal to the countries in which these systems operate as these factors shape the countrys' cultures of learning. Wale Adebani's "Rethinking Knowledge Production in Africa", Olukoya and Insa Nolte's "Nigerian Academia and the Politics of Secrecy", along with Arowosegbe's essay already mentioned, all in *Africa* 86 (2) 2016, among other explorations, map these developments.

What is the health of the culture of knowledge quest in African academia generally, both for the intrinsic fulfillment it provides and for its practical value, these being the twin foci of the human quest for knowledge? Olufemi Taiwo in a TED talk sums up a central conjunction between these two motivations in arguing that that a culture that does not seek knowledge when it does not [seem to] need it [in a practical sense], will not find it when it needs it [for practical purposes], a perspective that speaks to the demand by one view that, on account of its pressing problems, often problems of sheer survival, Africa should focus on so called "relevant research", research centred on evident, practical needs, neglecting the fact that some of the most impactful research did not originate as subjects with any practical applications.

As is evident from the "General Scholium", the conclusion of his magnum opus, *Principia Mathematica*, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, Isaac Newton's work on gravitational theory and laws of motion, for example, using nothing more than pen, paper and rudimentary telescopes, was a philosophical enterprise conducted purely out of a desire to understand how the universe works, yet those abstract, theoretical discoveries are now central to space exploration. Albert Einstein's development of the energy/matter equivalence theory, again conducted largely through pen and paper and his imagination in the name of understanding how the cosmos operates, became central to the development of atomic and nuclear energy and his work on relativity has created a new understanding of the cosmos, an understanding ramifying

in projections about new technological forms. Quantum theory emerges from probing into the fundamental structure of matter and yet is yielding conceptions of new forms of computing. Imaginative projections beyond the present enable the creation of the future, Adisa Ajamu sums up in a Facebook essay in response to the inspirational character of the 2018 Hollywood film *Black Panther* on account of the film's electrification of ideas about African and Black people's potential.

In terms of the activities that drive the development of knowledge, what progress is being made in Africa generally in developing a culture of sustenance of academic initiatives, such as journals and books?

If a country and continent's academic journal and book culture is not strong, how will it cultivate the confidence in its scholarly ecosystem even amongst its own academics that will make it unnecessary to call for external validation of the products of its scholars?

What resources exist to achieve what has to be described as such a leap in self-positioning and what efforts can be made to develop these resources?

To what degree are these issues purely or largely in the hands of academics and to what degree are they factors defining the larger socio-economic and political environment within which the scholars operate, such as questions of publishing and the business systems including capital required to sustain academic publishing houses and the level and quality of Internet access?

What can be learnt from the example of Dr. Joan Ugo Mbagwu's presentation at the conference of both her papers, "African Youths and the Indigenous Approaches to Resolving Conflict in Africa" and "Beyond Military Force as Strategy for Countering Terrorism in Nigeria: A Handbook", which, along with drawing on endogenous African knowledge are also expressed in books published in Nigeria which were available for sale at the conference?

What will it take to achieve both a research culture that explores Africa's own contributions to knowledge, studies what other continents are producing and makes its discoveries readily accessible to Africans in place of the current tension between the pragmatics of publishing locally and the greater prestige of publishing in books and journals produced in the West, a good number of which are either not affordable by Africans or are not even visible to them as texts physically accessible in their own environments?

How can Africa achieve what the West has achieved, bringing the world to itself as it goes out into the world, creating a space within which knowledge of the continent and of the world outside the continent can be cultivated and integrated within Africa even if sourced outside Africa?

Contrastive but correlative views on this dependence are summed up by two aspects of Jeremiah Arowosegbe's "African Scholars, African Studies and Knowledge Production on Africa" (*Africa* 86 (2) 2016: 324–38):

With historians whose scholarship has not gone beyond the thresholds of narrative historiography, philosophers who have no knowledge of, for example, Hegel and Heidegger, and psychologists who have neither heard of nor read Derrida, Lacan, Althusser and Foucault, the quality of interaction with the present crop of locally bred academics in most Nigerian universities is disappointing.

Resonating with the attitude suggested by the speaker on institutional independence of African academia at the Falola conference, however, Arowosegbe is also able to declare:

The dominant practices and values shaped and shared by the Northern research agenda distort and engender imbalances in knowledge production across the global South generally. Such practices and values legitimize certain regional interests but neglect others. ... Engagement with them is characterized by several levels of uneven participation. Their operations also take place within a discourse in which international may narrowly refer to the global North.

These perspectives, from the conference speaker and from Arowosegbe, suggest the painful paradoxes of scholars in the global South, particularly Africa.

The Nigerian scholars referenced by Arowosegbe might not know of Derrida, Lacan, Althusser and Foucault perhaps because at the time these European scholars became prominent in the West, possibly in the 80s and 90s and beyond, those African scholars and the libraries of their institutions could hardly afford books and journals from the West, leading to a blind spot in knowledge of Western scholarship in theory after the 60s and perhaps 70s, the years when some of these African scholars might have got their PhDs, at times in the West.

The entire post-colonial movement involving Homi Bhaba and Gayatri Spivak to the rethinking of the Western tradition by such movements as Deconstruction could have been accessible only through few books in university libraries in an era when the Internet was just beginning to penetrate Nigeria, for example. The situation would have been unevenly different in various universities in different countries, though, as I learnt that that even a member of the public at Ibadan in that period could take part in vigorous discussions on post-colonialism at the University of Ibadan in which Harry Garuba was prominent. Arowosegbe seems to have done his BA and postgraduate studies in the University of Ibadan in the 90s.

Many of those scholars short-changed by the challenges of the Nigerian economy, keeping them out of step with cognitive developments outside their countries, were dedicated teachers, and, and in spite of inadequate tools, their creative influence and the wealth of their humanity have forever contributed to shaping their students as a number of these students testify.

In my current explorations in Nigeria, I observe that books and many of the journals from the West remain expensive on account of the low power of the country's currency, the books being largely not visible in my current experience in the premier university cities of Lagos and Ibadan, leaving the relatively expensive Internet access the best option for education on scholarly trends outside one's immediate environment.

Beyond but related to questions of access to knowledge of Western scholarship as highlighted by Arowosegbe, implying that the achievements of those Western thinkers he mentions are indispensable to the disciplines they have primarily impacted, must a philosopher in a non-Western context, be informed about Hegel and Heidegger, two scholars operating within a largely Eurocentric tradition and whose knowledge beyond the stream of Western thought from the Greeks to the Middle Ages to their own time may be seen as significantly qualified?

Of what relevance to you is a thinker whose scholarly tradition is not necessarily identical with the one you are interested in? The German philosopher Martin Heidegger is strategic in restating questions and attitudes at the intersection of religion and philosophy, integrating critical reasoning with imaginative and poetic thought, probing, in his *Being and Time* fundamental questions of the nature of being, his range of reference indicating his questioning as reaching back towards the Italian philosopher Thomas Aquinas' seminal contributions on the question to the ancient Greeks Aristotle and Plato's fundamental struggles with the same question, and through his creative style of philosophizing, Heidegger's thought proving catalytic for much of Western thought in different disciplines.

The German thinker Georg Hegel was a polymath who aspired to a comprehensive embrace of the world of knowledge in terms of an understanding of the motive forces and direction of existence, combining both speculative sweep with depth of concrete examination of phenomena, as one scholar describes his work. His magisterial blend of speculative thought and ratiocinative elucidation of far reaching imaginative range makes him one of the great demonstrators of how what is otherwise mythic and religious thought in its grand aspirations can be baptized into a form of ratiocinative cognition, enabling particularly the philosophical system of the German thinker Karl Marx, one of the most influential philosophers of all times and places, Marx's influence demonstrated in the inspiration generated by his ambition

of changing the world through the power of ideas directed at a close study of human interaction in relation to the tension between social and individual existence, psyche and economics, many revolutionary movements across the world being significantly fed by his ideas or by ideas founded on his thought.

I started this essay with the aspiration of proving why the study of Heidegger and Hegel might not be necessary for a scholar whose focus is not Western thought but it seems I might have succeeded in demonstrating the contrary.

How will one understand Communism, for long the major contrast to Capitalism, grasp its influence on the Soviet Union and the Cold War, its influence in Vietnam and the Angola in their years of warfare and understand related tension prone environments over the years without understanding something of the ideas and influence of Marx and how does one grasp the foundational framework Marx transformed without some understanding of Hegel?

I had hoped to question whether the study of the Arab historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun, a central non-Western philosopher of history, can replace the study of Hegel, but has Ibn Kaldun had the scope of influence of Hegel, even if indirectly as Hegel has?

It might not be possible to study adequately in their late 20th century forms onward the various disciplines influenced by Heidegger without knowing something about that influence. Can these disciplines be studied in a way that brackets out contributions by scholars based in the Western tradition, that being the tradition most influenced by Heidegger?

### **Explicatory Depth, Range of Integration and of Access to Knowledge about Africa and from Africa Ifa, Nsibidi, Omonigbon and Lukasa Contrasted with I Ching, Astrology and Tarot**

How robust is literary criticism in classical Yoruba scholarship, for example, and can it be adequately addressed without recourse to Western critical tools, those tools being what were employed by Wande Abimbola in his pioneering analysis of Ifa literature in *An Exposition of Ifa Literary Corpus* and *Ifa Divination Poetry*?

Emmanuel Ofuasia's paper at the Falola@65 conference, "Deconstructionism as Illustrated in Ifa Divination", describes the Yoruba origin Ifa knowledge system as anticipating deconstructivist hermeneutics centuries before the development of this post-modern scholarly phenomenon in the West. Deconstruction operates, however, against the background of centuries of carefully elaborated critical thought from Greece to 20th century Europe which it both feeds on and contrasts itself against.

To what degree can the valiant labours of such scholars in Yoruba Studies as Wande Abimbola, Rowland Abiodun, Barry Hallen and John Olubi Sodipo, among others, represent the demonstration of a related depth of elaboration? Benin divination theory and practice, as represented for example by the work of Daryl Peavy on Ominigbon, is rich in discussions of levels of meaning, and the styles of expression through which these are communicated. What is the depth of elaboration of this tradition and to what degree is this knowledge publicly accessible?

One of the world's great symbol systems is Nsibidi of Nigeria's Cross River, integrating physical motion, speech, object arrangement, inscriptions of images at various levels of abstraction and figuration on human bodies and non-living surfaces such as ceramics and architecture, operating in relation to a dazzling cosmology referencing a broad range of details of human existence.

How much is known of this system in the light of the relatively few scholarly and general articles and PhD theses on it, as far as these are visible online, and its influence in the art of Victor Ekpuk among other artists, particularly since its cosmology and hermeneutics-its interpretive logic- and its spirituality are largely hidden from outsiders through a rigorous and carefully guarded process of unfolding revelatory exposition as people ascend the grades of the Ekpe/Mgbe esoteric order that is central in employing this symbol system, an information vacuum evident in the Order's effort to have Ekpe accredited by UNESCO as part of the world's precious intangible heritage, an effort that proved unsuccessful the last I knew of it?

Ifa, on the other hand, which has proven successful in the same aspiration of UNESCO accreditation, has books upon increasing number of books and essays and other communicative platforms explicating its framework, and, to some degree, its methodologies, so much so that its now possible to develop Ifa Studies as an academic discipline, possibly studying both Ifa in its intrinsic character and in terms of an extrinsic focus engaging every field of study from a grounding in Ifa, although its divinatory explicatory procedures are not explained in those books I have read, a relationship between information presentation and withdrawal of information, which, even though far from ideal, Nsibidi studies could also learn from.

On the other hand, is excessive esotericism not a major reason why classical African systems of thought have not permeated their environments more than they have done so far, facilitating their marginalisation by cultural imperialism emerging with colonialism and sustained even in a post-colonial context? If Nsibidi, for example had been more democratized, would its capacities as a script not have gone beyond the stage it has reached so far, its recent

expanded exposure leading to efforts such as those of the researcher Nsibiri to develop the system as evident in the online efforts under that scholar's name?

The best known and most influential divination systems are Asian and Western, the Chinese I Ching and the European astrology and Tarot, although astrology has a multi-cultural history well beyond its prominence in European esotericism, decentralized but vital forms of knowledge, as one view represented by Western esotericism scholar Wouter Hanegraaff describes Western esotericism. The influence of these non-African divinatory systems is due to their absolute democratization in terms of a basic operational system which any interested person of average intelligence can use. The esoteric essence of these systems as aspirations to reach into mysterious forms of understanding that underlie casualty is thus highlighted. The divinatory mode of applying Ifa, on the other hand, is often mystified, described as inaccessible except to an initiate and in the US, in particular, where Ifa is gathering great momentum, initiation is made an expensive and elaborate endeavour, leaving anguished aspirants on the Facebook Ifa Studies group I run to agonising over difficulties of access not present in such religions as Christianity.

Is it not more realistic to present such a system in terms of ascending levels of knowledge, made readily accessible to aspirants rather than creating road-blocks that further constrict the global impact of Africa's contributions to the world of knowledge in reference to what is perhaps the best known and only potentially globally influential African divination system, as the I Ching has influence well beyond China?

One of the world's most sophisticated, subtle and complexly powerful hermeneutic systems is created by the Luba people of Congo, developed by interpreting the intersection of space, history and human relations through a network of relationships between physical structure, colours and shapes embodied by the harmony of vast interpretive scope and ergonomic compression represented by the hand held lukasa board.

To what degree are the insights of these various systems integrated and correlated with those from other parts of Africa, such as the Fulani cosmological interpretation of the coats of cattle presented by Germaine Dieterlen in "Initiation Among the Peul Pastoral Fulani" in her edited *African Systems of Thought* and other works and the Zulu conjunction of all contraries representing the fundamental structures existence, from space to time to life and death in terms of the symbolism of the calabash as described by Mazisi Kunene in *Anthem of the Decades*?

Central to the ideational range of Western scholarship is the pan-European and pan-Western scope of its ideational and epistemic core from within which it is confidently reaching out to engage with and at times integrate other worlds of knowledge. The pool of integrated knowledge endogenous to

the West being drawn upon with ease in this inward and outward looking cognitive quest is huge, based upon centuries of painstaking international synthesis spanning ancient Greece and Rome as well as Arab and Persian contributions relaying this knowledge to the West.

Even as a teenager or young adult in Nigeria, without even auditing any course in art, I could give names of the classical Western artists from the Renaissance to the emergence of modern art in 18-19th century Paris, knowledge gained from children's books and general audience texts imported to Nigeria from the West. That exposure laid foundations enabling me readily identify works of various Western peoples and a number of classic masters in Western art.

How easy is it for a person in Africa to educate themselves about African arts, for example, beyond what is visible in their own environment? To what degree does Internet access enable this?

In the light of these challenges, what may be envisaged about the dehierarchisation of the relationship between Western and African scholarship, scholarship in the Western tradition in relation to scholarship in the African tradition, a latter tradition which certainly exists in the humanities, scholarship defined by practices of inter-referentiality within various disciplines, scholars citing and building on each other's works, a situation in which the West is often able to maintain a closed system in which scholars in that tradition, of any ethnic origin, do not need to refer to scholarship outside the tradition on account of the range and depth of its carefully systematised ideas while African scholarship, for example, perhaps often has to reference the Western tradition even when discussing non-Western issues as Abiola Irele poignantly sums up in "The African Scholar"?

### **The Conference as a Personal Inspiration**

I would like to reflect on the convergence of multifarious possibilities on myself as a participant at these celebrations, presenting the nexus of perceptions about life the conference and its associated convivialities have been for me.

Looking back over the arrival day and the three days of festivities that followed, it is clear I have had one of the greatest experiences of my life. The entire encounter dramatizes the celebration, by a group of people from different aspects of life, of the power and beauty of the life of the mind, a life to which I am also committed, this experience actualizing, in a spectacular manner, the power of such a life. All scholars will not be as celebrated as Falola, but people will always exist who will testify to the validity and power of the work of the scholar as a particular type of person, a committed ruminator on and



disseminator of reflections on the significance of our existence as we journey between the great unknowns.

The revered Alaafin of Oyo, His Imperial Majesty, Oba Lamidi Adeyemi III, Oba Adedokun Omoniyi Abolarin, the Orangun of Oke-Ila, Oba Saliu Akanmu Adetunji, the Olubadan of Ibadan, accompanied by the attendant chiefs of the Alaafin and the Obas, Ogbeni Rauf Aregbesola, the governor of Osun state, the representatives of the governor of Oyo State and other political and traditional leaders who celebrated with us were not there because association with Falola would necessarily add anything to their stature in life, assist with political connections or facilitate access to various forms of secular power. They were there to celebrate someone whose ideas have moved many, whose mentorship ripples across the globe, from PhD students to younger and senior academics whom he has guided or collaborated with or both, thereby shaping many careers.

He is also a rich socialiser, as evident from his interactions at the festivities and the impromptu creative interaction I had with him and a couple of his friends on the night after the banquet.

The scholarly dignitaries who were present, from the President of the Historical Society of Nigeria and Head of the Department of History, University of Ibadan, Professor CBN Ogbogbo, who gave one of the two keynote speeches, to Professor Jide Owoeye, Pro-Chancellor and Chairman of the Governing Council, Lead City University, Ibadan, to the representative of the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, speaking for the vice-chancellors and past vice-chancellors of various universities who were at the celebrations, a declaration also articulated by the spokesperson of the Olabisi Onabanjo University in awarding Falola the honorary doctorate after the conference, described themselves as compelled to pay homage, because homage it certainly is, to a figure whose work has become an inspirational matrix, a dynamic receptacle for practically everything about scholarship on Africa.

Falola's friends who were there and the academics who organized the conference both testified to his inspiring qualities that moved so many people and so many institutions to congregate in Ibadan to honour someone who is not a captain of industry, is not and has never been a political figure and does not seem to nurse such aspirations, whose life is defined by what Gloria Emeagwali described in her keynote speech as his indefatigable work in generating knowledge, cultivating institutions and building people.

The many scholars who took part in the conference were drawn by the opportunity to continue the task of cultivating citadels of knowledge represented by the processes of reflection, empirical investigation, recording and distribution that defines the world of scholarship, Falola's pre-eminence in which has moved so many to congregate in the city where Falola was born and where he

spent his earliest formative years, a city resplendent in Nigerian cultural history by the many luminaries associated with the University of Ibadan in the course of its existence and by the city's strategic role in Yoruba history, that history being the originating platform of Falola's scholarship from where he has fanned out to an encyclopaedic engagement with the humanities and the social sciences particularly in relation to Africa.

This whirlwind of activity has placed a mirror to my mind, compelling me to ask what my life is about and how best to bring to fruition the potential I can see within me, as has been achieved for himself by Toyin Falola, living his childhood in inauspicious circumstances, as one of his friends, Bola Dauda, described him in a paper at the conference, "Lessons from Toyin Falola's Way of Thinking", yet who has spectacularly reshaped that life, becoming an exemplar for many.

### **The Unrobing and Reroxing Sequence**

A central significance of the conference is summed up for me by what I describe as the unrobing and reroxing sequence of the banquet of Tuesday, 30 January 2018, at the International Conference Centre, Ibadan. The sequence can be seen in my Flickr album on the celebratory sequence, in Toyin Falola's Flickr album on the conference and in the official conference Flickr account.

In the unrobing and reroxing sequence, Adeshina Afolayan assists Toyin Falola in putting on the agbada, an elaborate form of classical Nigerian male couture, presented to Falola by the conference organising committee composed of Afolayan, Samuel Oloruntoba, Wale Ghazal and Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso..

On being presented with the splendid agbada, Falola spontaneously removed his cap and the exquisitely prepared agbada he was already wearing, in order to put on the new one he was being presented with, in recognition of the grand symbolism represented by the presentation, in a culture, Yoruba/Nigerian/African, in which clothes are central symbolic forms, artistic and scriptic signifiers, at times functioning as an entire library of semiotic configurators, as in Nigerian Cross River ukara cloth encrusted with the cosmos spanning Nsibidi symbolism and Ghanaian Adinkra symbolism originating from its use in symbolising messages brought from beyond birth and messages taken beyond life in the world. "Eniyan ni aso mi", states the Yoruba proverb, which may be translated as "People represent the clothes with which I am splendidly adorned", a saying that encapsulates the symbolism of the presentation ceremony at the Falola conference banquet, a ceremony that incidentally sums up the implications of the festivities dramatized by the celebration of Falola.

Falola's younger professional associates whose lives he has contributed to shaping positively have chosen to expand the scholar's self-adornment generated by the reach of his scholarship by showcasing that achievement through this conference and its festivities, achieving the monumental scope of the celebrations by drawing upon the goodwill of numerous people positively impacted by the master scholar's intellectual and pastoral genius as thinker, institution builder and mentor, the triadic configuration of Falola's career, as outlined by Gloria Emeagwali.

Without the recognition of one's achievements by others, how will the significance of that achievement be actualised among humanity? Without helping to build others through recognition and cultivation of their potential, how will the commonwealth of human well-being expand?

Falola has adorned himself. Falola has adorned others. Those others whom he has adorned have chosen to adorn him in turn.

### **Impact of the Conference: Questions Arising**

Recalling the success of the conference as I read around the subject of the development of knowledge in Africa, specifically the dismal picture painted by Jeremiah O. Arowosegbe in "African Scholars, African Studies and Knowledge Production in Africa" (*Africa* 86 (2) 2016: 324–38) and other contributions in the same journal, Wale Adebani's "Rethinking Knowledge Production in Africa", Olukoya Ogen and Insa Nolte's "Nigerian Academia and the Politics of Secrecy" and Ousmane Kane's "Arabic Sources and the Search for a New Historiography in Ibadan in the 1960s", testifying to past achievements and current struggles in scholarship in Africa, a volume preceded by such interventions as the "African Studies and Knowledge Production in the Universities in Postcolonial Africa" in *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies*, 40:2 2014, and looking forward to such initiatives as the "Africa in the World: Shifting Boundaries and Knowledge Production" conference to be held in Johannesburg, South Africa, May 25–28, 2018, along with a host of initiatives around the same subject, extending beyond African Studies with the Decolonising the Curriculum movement in the West, I ask what is the potential impact of the Toyin Falola@65 conference?

The conference was wonderful in providing a platform for sharing views on centring Africa in scholarship, not simply as a subject of study but as a source of methods of study, of ideas for addressing various human challenges. How far could these efforts go in inspiring a renaissance of scholarship on the continent?

The conference organisers pulled off a great feat in the stupendous organisation of what turned out to be both an intellectual feast and a spectacle of

food, drink, dance and pageantry, a most memorable experience combining the African culture of gay celebration with the scholarly world of feisty projection of bold ideas.

To the best of my knowledge, Nigeria and perhaps Africa, are not known anymore for conferences that brings the world together, even in various fields of African Studies. The most powerful books in African art, a field I am particularly interested in, are often not written by people resident in Africa nor are they published in Africa, with few exceptions, such as the publications of Bruce Onabrakpeya's Ovuomaroro Gallery and his latest book, a sumptuous production edited by dele jegede, *Masks of Flaming Arrows*, which was published by Five Continents Editions in Milan, Italy.

The same situation might be true in other aspects of African Studies for various reasons. Exceptions are being made by partnerships like that between Toyin Falola, at the University of Texas and Adeshina Afolayan, at the University of Ibadan, together bringing out the Palgrave Handbook of African Philosophy, the most up to date definitive text in the field, in African philosophy, a book, however, that on account of its formidable size and its production in hardback will not be cheap or even moderately prized, leading to questions about the capacity of libraries in Africa to afford it, although this issue can be partly addressed through cheap access to electronic forms of the text made available to libraries and individuals.

Falola, whose birthday and work inspired the conference, clearly has an agenda of the widest possible scope of empowerment of the broadest range of scholars and institutions in African Studies, as aspects of his broader knowledge projections which include sole authorship of books and essays in various fields, writing and co-editing books and articles with younger and more mature scholars, including at least one, *Ken Saro-Wiwa*, with a former PhD student of his, Roy Doron, organising book productions and conferences on various scholars and artists and initiating or contributing to journal creation and management and various book series and playing a central role in scholarly publishing houses. That agenda is increasingly bearing fruit. It is gratifying to observe with this conference a particularly concrete expression of that agenda, bringing home to Africa the site of intellectual creativity at the most dynamic level, rather than the localisation of African studies conferences in the West that has too often been the case. This Africa location focused strategy is also adopted by TOFAC, the Toyin Falola Annual International Conference on Africa and the African Diaspora, created in honour of Falola by the Ibadan Cultural Studies Group and which holds every year in an African city, and which will hold between July 3-5 this year in Kenya.

What does the quality of planning and execution represented by the Toyin Falola@65 conference suggest about the possibilities of scholarly development

in Africa, in a continent not famous for the power or resilience of its institutions? If four people, without extraordinary material means of means of their own, but demonstrating amazing organisational abilities, could execute a project of this magnitude, what does that say about the possibilities for scholarly development on the continent?