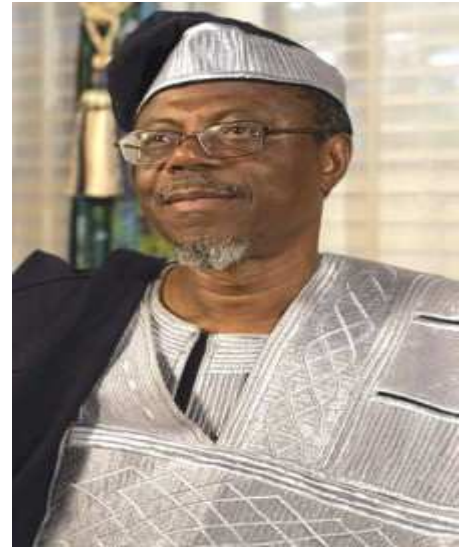


Why I Write About Ibadan

An Interview with Professor Toyin Falola by Tokunbo Olajide

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Professor Toyin Falola, 59, is an internationally acclaimed Nigerian historian. Born in Ibadan, Falola taught History at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), Ile-Ife, before he joined the University of Texas, Austin in 1991 where he is currently the Frances Higginbotham Nalle Centennial Professor in History. A Fellow of the Historical Society of Nigeria, and the Nigerian Academy of Letters; Falola has written and edited more than 60 books, including his acclaimed memoir *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt*. His latest work is a 1,000-plus page reference guide on Ibadan titled *Ibadan: Foundation, Growth and Change (1830–1960)*. Falola recently unveiled the new book at the University of Ibadan, where he met with Tokunbo Olajide and spoke about his scholarly work and the state of Nigeria.



Olajide: Your new book, *Ibadan: Foundation, Growth and Change (1830-1960)*, is yet another of your work on the town. What's it with your intellectual preoccupation with Ibadan?

Falola: It's not just intellectual; it is also practical and patriotic. You know I'm from here, Ibadan. Also, my entry into the profession is through Yoruba history, in the 19th Century. I've been constant in doing this. Every three years, I do a book on this part of the country. Again, it's a constant reminder that the past remains very present. We are not talking about a past that is dead. In the last chapter of my current book, that's precisely what I did – itemizing the relevance of that past to contemporary politics. But with this book which is huge – over 1,000 pages long – it's also to do two things at once. If somebody was looking for the history of the town, instead of searching for 50 books, why can't he have one? One that you can also pick up at the airport and begin to read on the plane. It will be followed up, by this time next year, with a photographic book. For those who don't want to read long text, at least they can appreciate photographs.

Olajide: You partnered with the Ibadan Foundation in writing this book. Is it a sponsored work?

Falola: No. I did it on my own and they did not ask me to do it. What really happened is I did not want to publish it in the U.S, where I'm based. I wondered why I would write a book on Ibadan and publish it abroad, especially because I have my own series where I could include it. I thought that my people would not have access to it. So, I came home last year when they did a conference that is named after me – the Toyin Falola Annual International Conference on Africa and the African Diaspora, TOFAC. I saw books published by Bookcraft. Bishop (Matthew) Kukah, a great friend of mine, gave me a copy. And I said: 'Oh, they can do a good job!' Bookcraft and I met, and they said they would do it. But because it's a big book, we thought: how can it work? That was how the Ibadan Foundation came in. It's not a sponsored book; it's purely my work.

Olajide: How has the Ibadan of present changed from the Ibadan you grew up in?

Falola: Oh, tremendously! My memoir – *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt* – is about Ibadan of around 1953 to around 1965 and I'm finishing a follow-up memoir on the same city that will take the story up till the end of the Nigerian Civil War. The changes have been tremendous. You will notice the expansion of physical spaces. What we used to call villages have disappeared. But in that expansion of spaces – and we thank God for blessing people to be able to use the spaces – you also find that we keep on making mistakes in terms of planning. It's a bad joke, but I've made this joke so many times: that to rebuild Ibadan, one has to drop a nuclear bomb on it. Though, I'm not wishing that. But it will take the equivalent of a revolution to re-engineer that space and make it a beautiful landscape and city. People don't believe it when I tell them that when I was growing up, there was emphasis on vegetation; that they were planting trees and things like that. But these days, nobody cares about that any more.

Then you notice the very fact that it's still not an industrial place. Ibadan is one store or shop joining another. Added to that landscape now is a city of mosques and churches. One day, I decided to walk on one street and I counted 43 churches. I said: 'Okay. This is a street of all sinners who needed repentance.' Or why would you need 43 churches on one street? So, you'll find tremendous changes, but we've also lost some opportunities to rebuild and reshape the city.

Olajide: Is there anything in your background that caused you to tread the path that you're on now?

Falola: I'm an historian and the choice of that profession is also connected to my early childhood. As I indicated in my memoir, there's a connection to grassroots, activism – an understanding that the challenges of the present must confront some of the conditions of the past. It was actually that my childhood that led me to this discipline.

Olajide: Do you think intellectuals have played a good enough role in the scheme of things now in Nigeria, especially those of you based abroad?

Falola: Anywhere in the world, we have individuals with different skills set. As simple as what you think your job is, it doesn't mean you have the skills set to do it. And as simple as you think my job is, it doesn't mean you have the skills set to do it. Intellectuals are people with the skills to generate ideas. The skills set to turn ideas into policy, however, is a different one. But it's also an intellectual project. You also have intellectuals who have the skills to put ideas into practice. And then, you have the skills set to implement ideas – the skills set of managers. In some sense, we have to be fair to scholars that in the mission of scholarship, they are generating ideas. They are doing that. And sometimes, we cannot blame them that they are not using those ideas because that is not their primary job. Where they can use those ideas, as in projects in agriculture or engineering, I think they also do. So, we've achieved a lot. But we are also still struggling. Generating ideas is an expensive project. It relies on integrity and research funding, which once you get, you will not divert it to other things. And it relies on a minimum level of comfort that all citizens need to work – good roads, electricity. When I was in the primary school, they would give us civic lessons. Any time you finish your food and you go to the toilet, you must wash your hands. If you go to the toilet to wash your hands, is there water to wash your hands? So, there is a disconnect between what people say and what they want us to do. Are the facilities available?

Olajide: So what's the future? Do you see any hope on the horizon?

Falola: There's no country that doesn't imagine a great future. There's no such place in the world that they'll say our future is hopeless. Human beings don't think like that and nations don't think like that. We're dealing with contradictions. Once we minus the negative contradictions, the positive will come out. Bear in mind we have a large number of people and that's what we need for development. We have a large number of creative and intelligent people. That's what you need for development. Let me tell you a popular joke, though I don't know who invented it. It says that God was trying to create many places and when it came to the turn of Nigeria, he was doing so with his angels. He gave them land, He gave them good water, weather and vegetation. The angels were now getting agitated, asking: 'God, do you want to take heaven to earth?' God replied: 'Why are you in a hurry? Wait until I give them the last thing.' Then he gave them bad leaders. If you have all these tremendous resources and you have bad leaders, things won't work. So, the variable of leadership has got to change. The civil society has been very active and very combative. If the institutions become less corrupt and we have good leaders, in five years, you won't recognise Nigeria in terms of its rapid transformation.

Olajide: You've been making great academic strides abroad, are you also in touch with scholars at home?

Falola: Very much so! And you are asking me on a day we are trying to talk about global intellectual connections. I just had a meeting with the Vice-Chancellor [of the University of Ibadan] with a group of other people. We're meeting with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and also dialoguing with students. Every year, I bring people from all over the world to conferences in Nigeria. Beginning from last year, they started another conference, named after me, where scholars in the Diaspora – Africans and non-Africans – will come to Nigeria, and other parts of Africa. We take a theme and we look at it from different perspectives, bringing in variables of ethnicity, gender and nationalities. So, I'm extremely connected.

Olajide: You're over there right now where it appears all very rosy. At the time you had to leave Nigeria for abroad, why did you leave?

Falola: It's not that rosy all over there, so let me quickly correct that impression. A large majority of Nigerians are not into occupations – they are just there. Sometimes, they are not even able to use their skills. I said at the Adelabu Lecture recently in Ibadan that if a number of Nigerians can do what they do in London in Ibadan, they won't be in London. They don't want to be seen as taxi drivers in Ibadan, but they can drive cabs in Chicago. In the 1980s, there were two circumstances that made me, Biodun Jeyifo, Achebe and others leave. The Structural Adjustment Programme devastated the universities. Things have changed now though – much better than when I left. And in my own case, bear in mind that I was into some kind of political activism (remember that Babangida put me in detention for a few days). The important point I like to make is that people should not confuse relocation with disconnection. I'm a transnationalist. Transnationalists live in multiple worlds. If I were to take you to the U.I. Staff Club now, they will say: 'Why didn't we see you two days ago?' That's because they see me all the time. Transnationalists travel a lot. It's been an on-and-off thing, so there's no disengagement. I've not really left Nigeria, though I no longer work at O.A.U. [Obafemi Awolowo University], Ile-Ife, where I used to be. On Monday (9 July), I'm giving the first distinguished lecture at the Adeleke University. I gave a lecture at the Lead City University in June. I'm going to Calabar in October; I'm going to Kaduna State in November; Maiduguri wants me to come before the end of the year. So, once you do that kind of transnationalist dialoguing, there's no break with one's homeland.

Olajide: Beyond your fleeting engagements with the institutions, have you been on, or considered a sabbatical with any?

Falola: I've done more than even what you're suggesting. There are newer collaboration templates. For instance, once in a year, I do major seminars in different African universities by bringing young people together, in which you challenge them on current ideas. There was one I did in which 46 people came from Nigeria. So, there are those partnerships. But at this stage in my career, it's pretty difficult for me to get that bulk of time to stay in one particular place. Even in my base in Austin, Texas, it's difficult for me to stay in that one location for seven days before one engagement moves me to one place or another.

Olajide: Your transnationalist nature perhaps also endeared you to UNESCO. What's the nature of the work you do at the UNESCO committee?

Falola: My unit is in charge of what we call issues of past injustice in relation to slavery; documenting the experience of enslaved people all over the world. We try to encourage indigenous people not to lose their history and to document the struggles they've gone through. Those data can feed issues of human rights and inequality. Second, you know there is still a current form of slavery – child trafficking and prostitution. We deal with these too. We also study places that must become important global centres, places like Badagry. I'm the current Vice-President of (UNESCO's) International Scientific Committee, ISC, and it involves a lot of work in terms of travelling and giving speeches. We remind people to be aware of what is going on now and to be sensitive to what happened in the past so that it doesn't happen again.

Olajide: Recently the National Universities Commission, NUC, suspended the licences of six private universities over standards. What is your take on the mushrooming of private universities around the country?

Falola: First of all, we don't have enough universities. Let's be clear on that. For a population of over 140 million, we have over 100 universities. That's not enough. So, we actually have to create more. But because we need more universities doesn't mean we should have mediocre universities. We have to balance the fact that we don't have enough with the reality that universities are bodies of ideas, not just buildings. You can't have a university without a good library or productive intellectuals. That's a contradiction. So, it is how to balance that that we still have to figure out. At the same time, we have to ensure that over-centralisation does not kill innovation. For instance, a university in Ibadan can say it wants to focus on issues of flooding or issues around waste management because these are problems peculiar to Ibadan. Universities should not look alike. University of Ibadan should not look like Usmanu Dan Fodio University. They should reflect global academies quality, but they must also be able to reflect local circumstances. Usmanu Dan Fodio should be a centre for the study of Islam. Far more than what Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife should be in terms of their locations. Some private universities too may also build some dynamics that are peculiar to their locations. But we should not allow them to offer mediocre education if that is the reason they are in trouble.

Olajide: The Nigerian state is currently going through one of its most challenging periods in history, with escalating insecurity. Is there anything in the past we can apply to the current situation?

Falola: Bear in mind that this is a country that has experienced a civil war – that is the most intense of any instability. After you've experienced a civil war, the expectation is that you should have learnt so many lessons from that conflict. Unfortunately, that has not been our case. The conditions that led to that civil war in the 60s do remain.

My fear is that if politics continue to run like this, the larger majority of our citizens will lose interest in what you call democracy and that would be a disaster. If democracy doesn't deliver, people are going to lose interest.

With respect to northern Nigeria, the collapse of local government, the inability of the state to use institutions has led to one thing: we now police the youths and the street with the police. Rather than offering development, providing services, the state now calls on the police to handle its citizens. Whenever you do that, we know the result: citizens will revolt, and some segments, like the Boko Haram, will take to violence. If you don't create a diversified economy, when the youth finish their education, irrespective of any level, and they can't be gainfully engaged, you are telling them that the state is irrelevant. So, they begin to take to two options: if they are men, they take to crime; if they are women they take to prostitution. In their twenties, you damage them so badly, so psychologically that you are making their recovery very difficult. You now create a condition where majority of the people are very angry and when that's the case, the state loses control.

We are thus dealing with a situation that is very volatile. My own recommendation now is not just a reform of the democratic process; it's that the struggle for accountability is the most important thing that we have to face now. Without dealing with issue of accountability, I don't think we are going to be able to move forward. We have to be more transparent. We want to know what the federal, state and local governments collect and how they spend it, and we want to be part of the process. It may very well be that we are going to lose confidence in the Senate and House of Representatives because they clearly are no longer representing us; they are representing themselves. It's not just a process of rethinking that structure, but the process of rethinking politics itself, in which the number one condition would now be less about distribution of power – whether the Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba man is the one holding this position – but more about accountability. And we've been disappointed so many times that now is the time to take to the streets that this corruption has gone too far.

Olajide: Because of corruption, Nigeria is still viewed from abroad in terrible light. How do we also polish our international image?

Falola: Our neighbour, Ghana, is a small country. Its name is not damaged. If a Ghanaian gets into trouble in the United States and he's asked where he's from, he says he is a Nigerian. He doesn't want to tarnish the image of Ghana. But we also have anger internally, such that when people talk about their country they manifest anger. And some of this is quite legitimate, we have to confess. You cannot have a politician collecting money from a businessman to exonerate him of blame in an oil subsidy probe, so much that he's said to have kept some in his cap. You cannot be having this and be talking of rebranding.

What we need to do is to use the names of many Nigerians doing well to market the country. Internationally, we have people like Fela that we can use. In fact, I even think he might be the only one we even have (though religious people might disagree with me) in terms of projecting us through music and culture. And we have good scholars abroad that we can use. For any one bad Nigerian, I know four good Nigerians.