Censorship of Historical Thought
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Ethnic tensions and military intervention in politics were the most precarious historical subjects in Nigeria.

1966 Late in 1966 historian Kenneth Onwuka Dike (1917–83), vice chancellor (1960–66) and director of the Institute of African Studies (1962–67) at Ibadan University, returned to his home province. He was an Igbo, and ethnic tensions had limited his freedom of movement in his administrative role at Ibadan University, located in Yoruba territory. An Eastern Nigeria History Project he had begun together with historian Joseph Anene in 1966 at Ibadan was aborted by the civil war (May 1967–January 1970), as was his plan for a new university in eastern Nigeria. In 1971 he became the first professor of African history at Harvard University.

1970 Around 1970, historian Sylvanus Cookey (1934–) lived in exile and worked in the United Kingdom and at the history department of the University of California, Los Angeles. He was the author of Britain and the Congo Question, 1885–1913 (New York [1968]).

1970–84 From early 1970 (after the civil war) to 1982, Chukwuemeka Ojukwu (1933–), historian, army commander, and leader of the secessionist state of Biafra (1967–70), was exiled in Ivory Coast. In 1982 he was pardoned, and he returned to Nigeria. When Major General Muhammadu Buhari came to power on 31 December 1983, Ojukwu was imprisoned, probably on account of his former political activities. After his release in October 1984, he went into private business.

pre-1976 By 1976 economic historian R.J. Gavin, a representative of the so-called Ibadan school of historiography at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, was reportedly “forced out” of Zaria.

1978 In August or September, historian Jacob Ajayi (1929–), professor at Ibadan University (1958–72, 1978–89), was summarily removed from his post as vice chancellor at the University of Lagos (1972–78) after extensive rioting after a funeral in April, attributed to university students.

1989 Writer Kole Omotoso (1943–) declared that parts of Just before Dawn (Ibadan 1988), his novel about Nigerian history from 1918 to 1988, in which historical sources were copiously quoted, had been censored. According to Omotoso, the publishers were forced to excise large parts of the manuscript because they revealed details about the postindependence era, particularly about the role of senior army officers in politics. After publication of some excerpts two days before the novel’s launch on 20 July 1988, General Olusegun Obasanjo, former and later head of state (1976–79, 1999–), objected to his being mentioned as one of those attending a 1983 meeting of senior military officers at which the decision was allegedly made for the army to intervene in Nigerian politics. The publisher complied with the demand and corrected the text by eliminating the list of names at the meeting on the penultimate page.

1989–90 In [June] 1989 Yusufu Bala Usman, a radical history teacher at Ahmadu Bello University and strong critic of President Ibrahim Babangida’s government (in office 1985–93), was told in a letter that he was dismissed “in the public interest”. In June 1990 a judge ruled that the dismissal was illegal. In May 1989 the minister of education had announced that all university teachers were forbidden by law to take part in partisan politics. Teachers were given until late May either to withdraw from politics or to face official action. Thereafter vice chancellors were asked to monitor the activities of their employees and compile a list of teachers who failed to comply with the new regulations for scrutiny by the National University Commission. Bala Usman was the first victim of these regulations. With his historical work as a point of departure, he had criticized the lack of democracy and the corruption of the political system (for example in his For the Liberation of Nigeria, 1979).

1990– Toyin Falola (1953–), historian at Obafemi Awolowo University (1977-90), Ife, Oyo State, went into voluntary exile in Canada, where he worked at York University, Ontario (1990–91), and to the United States, where he was a professor of history at the University of Texas, Austin (1991–). He was a specialist in the history of West Africa, Nigeria, and Yoruba-speaking people since the nineteenth century, and series editor of the Rochester Studies in African History and the Diaspora. The Buhari government (1983–85) disapproved of his book The Rise and Fall of Nigeria’s Second Republic 1979–1984 (1985), with Julius Ihonvbere as coauthor. Falola was briefly detained under the Babangida government.

1990 In March Quality magazine editor Bala Dan Musa and former civilian governor (of Imo state) Sam
Mbakwe were arrested by the State Security Service. No reason was given, but in a Quality interview Mbakwe had said that “the spirit of Biafra” lived.

Among those who felt the repercussions of the aborted coup of 22 April 1990 led by Major Gideon Orkar, were the following: Lukman Abubakar, lecturer at the history department of Usman Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, was dismissed, possibly in connection with the coup.

On 28 April 1990, Obaro Ikime (1936–), history professor and head of the Ibadan University history department, was arrested for soliciting prayers for the stability of Nigeria after the aborted coup. Some of his views on religion were reflected in the coup leaders statement. He and others such as Osoba [q.v. 1990] were held for three months without charge and, when no evidence was found linking them to the coup, released on 1 August. After the Ministry of Education issued a letter requesting Ikime’s retirement from the university on the grounds that “further or continued employment in the relevant service would not be in the public interest”, he retired under compulsion on 1 September. The university’s governing council was not consulted.

Another historian declared wanted in the wake of the aborted coup was Segun Osoba, although he was in the United Kingdom and the Caribbean at that time [q.v. 1990: Ikime]. Osoba worked at Obafemi Awolowo University for many years and was frequently harassed and put in detention by the Babangida government for criticizing the military. He was Nigeria’s most sustained Marxist historian and his university reportedly refused to elevate him to full professor because of his writings.

Sources

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