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“A TERRAIN...ANGELS WOULD FEAR TO TREAD”: BIOGRAPHIES AND HISTORY IN NIGERIA

ABSTRACT

Biography can be a site of contestation. It can also serve as a canvas for a better understanding of the fundamentals of an uncertain and complex world. It engages in a remarkable interface of theory and practice as historical biographers seek to understand the genre from the perspective of modern historical scholarship and the problematic of life and existence in a dynamic world. The writing takes place within specific socio-cultural and political contexts and historiographical traditions and trajectory. This paper presents diverse experiences, developments, and issues in the production of biographies in the context of historical reconstruction within the field of history in Nigeria, Africa's most populous and uniquely diverse country. The relationship between the practice of writing of biographies, the acquisition of relevant sources, critiques of the works produced, and the use of peoples' recollections as sources have provided immense historical, political, moral, social and philosophical issues and illuminations of the contexts in which the subjects lived. Feedbacks and criticisms of the authors and subjects of these biographies have similarly produced both a better understanding of modern historical biographical writing in Nigeria, the challenges, and the nuanced reactions of people to those whom they thought should be the focus. It also dictates how they should be remembered and indirectly gives a synoptic understanding of those considered by others as "worthy of being consigned to historical oblivion".

Keywords: *Biography; history; diverse; feedbacks; authors; subjects; Nigeria; modern; historical oblivion*

1. INTRODUCTION

Every man or woman of stature is a property of history and so of biography.¹ This work asserts that although it is a truism that biographies come in many forms, some manifest or mirror “low-intensity warfare”.² They sometimes reflect either consensual views or conflicts and schisms in society since it is a genre spanning significantly diverse types of life-storytelling. Ademola Dasylva *et al.* have argued that “because auto/biographies focus on the lives of significant persons in society, they reflect the cultural values and their socio-economic epochs”.³ It is both a narrative form and an analytic field.⁴ Society is difficult to engage because the world is full of lies, biases, parodies and myths that must be analysed and critiqued. As noted by a commentator, “a man is either a villain or hero, depending on who subverts the narrative”.⁵ Therefore, biography is a field where you have to deal with dissonance in points of views and diverse conflicting perspectives. It is within that context that this article draws attention to works of historical biography and the complexity of writing, reading, and becoming the subject of biographies in Nigeria. It also has the task of triangulating works of academic biographers, the life, and times of the biographees within extant historical and biographical contexts, and the reactions of the readers to the published works. This work takes a contrary position to the views of literary critics that historians usually rank biography as an inferior type of history. According to Lois Banner, literary critics see biography “as inherently limited because it involves only one life, derives from a belles-lettres tradition rather than a scientific or sociological one, and is often written by non-academic historians who attract a lot of readers but lack the rigour of PhD”.⁶

While it may be true that non-academic historians were responsible for the writing of many of the biographies in the public domain, its revolving around “only one life” appears somewhat restricted in the case of African subjects. It also negates the African communitarian experience, as will be shown subsequently. There is no more significant misconception of a

1 See, BL Reid, “Practical Biography”, *The Sewanee Review* 83 (2), 1975, p. 363.

2 A Jackson, “The Verse Biography: Introduction”, *Biography: The Verse Biography* 39 (1), p. iii. The author’s description of biography as “low intensity warfare” will be made clearer in this work later.

3 AO Dasylva and R Oriaku, “Trends in Nigerian Auto/biography”, *History in Compass* 8 (4), 2010.

4 B Possing, *Understanding Biographies: On Biographies in History and Stories in Biography* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2017), p.7.

5 *The Scoop*, 18 January 2016. <https://thescoopng.com/2016/01/18/memory-without-memorial-history-nigeria/>, accessed 1 June 2020.

6 LW Banner, “Biography as History”, *The American Historical Review* 114 (3), 2009, pp. 579-586.

biography than this. This work is fundamentally interested in biography-writing in Nigeria on the methodological patterns observed by Michael Benham, who, summed up the genre in the following way:

Biography is a hybrid. It is a history crossed with a narrative. The biographer has to present the available facts of life yet shape their arbitrariness, untidiness, and incompleteness into an engaging whole. The readerly appeal lies in the prospect both of gaining documentary information, scrupulously researched and plausibly interpreted, and of experiencing the aesthetic pleasure of reading a well-made work of art with a continuous life story and a satisfying closure.⁷

Since every biography is a product of its society and its epoch, this work draws attention to the specificity of biographical production in Nigeria. At every stage of human history, its operational range is both phenomenal and dialectical. It challenges historians to produce beautiful and lucid writing while at the same time serving purposes such as filling the gaps in historical knowledge, serving as critiques of individuals and society, and pointing to existential inadequacies.⁸ It leads to the need for human self-knowledge dictated by the ever-increasing challenges of life.

Nevertheless, as controversial, or unpopular as the biography genre is in historical studies, it is seen by historians as a vital tool for understanding the trajectory of change and development in human society. It is even celebrated by many as a significant work of history. A biography can throw up a lot of questions regarding the ramifications it can address. As Birgitte Possing noted, should a biography be: “a picture of the period or is it a study of the personality? Is it a psychological interpretation of human character traits, or is it an analysis of a famous person from the past and his or her historical significance?”⁹ These questions are apposite in helping us to situate what we should consider in the writing of biographies. The genre biography more significantly serves as a mirror on society, culture, individual achievement, and history.¹⁰ The need for life histories has given insights into conditions and factors that have made the writing of biographies both a fascinating and challenging process. An intriguing aspect of this is the motive and politics for analysing the past of the people concerned. The borders and spectres that attend the genre biography energise discourses in the field.

7 M Benton, “Reading Biography”, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 41 (3), 2007, pp. 77-88.

8 Banner, “Biography as History”, p. 580.

9 Possing, *Understanding Biographies*, p. 7.

10 OC Adesina, *Prince, Professor, Patriot: Oladele Adebayo Ajose* (Ibadan: Rasmed Publications Limited, 2015), p. xviii.

The significance of history and its contemporary relevance becomes more striking in inter-relationships.¹¹ Biographies of *dramatis personae* in the African story have, therefore, served as valid and essential sources of that history. A historiographical survey of biographies would reveal the diversity of its approaches, styles, and themes. The big problem here is to find out and appreciate the dynamic aspects of human society dispassionately through its traditions, beliefs, values, records, habits, archives, artefacts, and worldviews. An excellent way to understand the dynamism of Biography is through its ethos and its epistemology. The works have arisen as responses to a constellation of issues and events.

Academic historians have set for themselves the daunting task of objectivity in the gathering of sources and in reporting their research – whether the focus is the unauthorised or the authorised biographies. Also, these works have taken very imaginative and creative walks into political, social, cultural, intellectual, economic, and philosophical landscapes that borrow significantly from the graphic of human and societal development. It is also an art of learning to write descriptive prose skilfully. In these, the scholars accommodate both the high and low cultures in overly critical contexts. The projects were the products of long-standing traditions used in solving specific historical problems. In doing this, we have tried to envision the biography genre in two contexts: process and outcome.

The motivations for writing biographies are usually well stated as the need to bring the past to the consciousness of the present and providing a better understanding of the life and times of men and women of note in society. Biographies also contribute to the knowledge of society through the life and times of individuals at different levels of existence. In some cases, it gives works that serve as dividends of learning, which help in the sharpening of moral standards. However, people embroiled either in interpersonal imbroglio or personality cults turn the opportunity of writing biographies into hagiography. Others while providing information or critiquing such works turn them into a ritual of negativities. Many others have equally regarded biographies as barren transmissions of an anachronistic past.

In contrast, others felt appalled at being confronted with the “whitewashed” stories of personalities that popular opinion had described as wicked, crude, and ruthless. In others, hangers-on who bask in the importance of heroic leadership deplored information given by others about their principals whom they have tended to worship far into the future in the tradition of Thomas Carlyle’s famous “glorification of the role of heroes and

11 GA Akinola, “Towards A Definition of Traditional African Philosophy of History”, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 11 (1/2), 1981, p. 70.

hero-worship in history".¹² Several others have responded through rejoinders in critical reviews or with well-executed counter-narratives in their authorised biographies or autobiographies.

2. HISTORICAL STUDIES AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF MODERN BIOGRAPHY IN NIGERIA

This section provides an overview of the historical records of early biographical works by Nigerian historians domiciled at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria's first university. Until the late 1970s and early 1980s writing biographies was not a popular subject with Nigerian historians. It was not considered an essential genre in Nigeria's historical academic and social firmaments since the first set of Nigerian historians were busy putting Africa back on the world map in their struggle for a place in the sun.

The historical imagination of the 1950s and 1960s paid more attention to the history of pre-colonial societies, kingdoms and empires that allowed the emerging African academic elite class to re-establish the African sense of history. It was a period when:

African nationalism [and the nationalist historiography popularised by Ibadan] insisted that Africans were not in any essential respects different from other human beings, and that a sense of history and the dynamics of change were essential characteristics of human societies; that the activities of Europeans could not be a substitute for the History of Africa in which Africans must be the central dramatis personae; that Africans were the subjects whose initiatives determined, for most of their history, the direction of change; and that they were not perpetual objects of the perpetual initiatives of others. Such a focus on the central role of Africans in history could not be achieved unless the group memory of different African peoples as reflected in their traditions received due weight as valid and essential sources of history.¹³

The salutary achievements of the Ibadan School of History in this regard have been documented well in the literature.

Thus, the only heroes recognised during the period were states and empire builders, kings, merchants, and warriors. These subjects of short scholarly interventions were published in journals rather than as book-length studies. The gaze of the historians of the period was fixed permanently

12 A Mazrui, "On Heroes and Uhuru-Worship", *Transition* 11, 1963, pp.23-28; See also, T Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: James Fraser, 1841), p. 393.

13 JF Ade Ajayi, "History and the Social Sciences". In: JF Ade Ajayi, *History and the Nation and Other Addresses* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd.,1990), p.57; See also, J Kizerbo, *Methodology and African Prehistory, UNESCO General History of Africa, Volume I* (Paris: Heinemann, 1980).

on the remote past. The token granted to the biographical subject was on the political and commercial heroes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries or earlier. These included political figures such as Jaja of Opobo, Nana Olomu of Itsekiri, the *Alaafins* of Oyo and a few women such as Moremi, Queen Amina of Zaria, Queen Idia, Emotan of Benin, Omu Okwei and a host of others.¹⁴ Any attention paid to contemporary figures was considered diversionary and unnecessary. These earlier texts went only a little way to draw attention to individuals who shaped the history of the country or the continent. They were only helpful in drawing attention to the figures of the past while not satisfying the aspirations of the contemporary age. Some historians, as would be seen later in this work, soon began to clamour for essential works that would illustrate the exciting times, people and events that occurred within living memory.

The earliest and tentative attempts at writing historical biographies occurred in the Department of History at Ibadan through Obaro Ikime's *Merchant Prince of the Niger Delta: The Rise and Fall of Nana Olomu – Last Governor of Benin River*.¹⁵ This work made a significant contribution to the understanding of the life and times of one of Nigeria's proto-nationalists. A few other attempts came after this. One of the works that followed on the heels of Ikime was the Biography of Bishop James Johnson and entitled "Holy Johnson: Pioneer of African Nationalism, 1836-1917" written by Emmanuel Ayankanmi Ayandele, a professor of history in the Department of History, University of Ibadan.¹⁶ It was an attempt to unearth the identity and contributions of a latter-day African nationalist from oblivion. Johnson was a colleague of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, Nigeria's first Bishop of the Anglican Church. In 1886, Johnson joined the Nigeria Legislative Council where he became the spokesman for African interest. In 1900, he became Assistant Bishop of the Niger Mission. Ayandele asserted that while several of his contemporaries and those before him continued to live on in peoples' consciousness, Johnson had gone into oblivion. Even though it was a reconstructive biography, Ayandele came under criticism for making too large a claim for the nationalist. According to Olisanwuche Esedede in the review of the book, "the use of superlative terms to depict this forgotten "prophet"

14 See for instance, F Ekejiuba and O Owei, "The Merchant Queen of Ossomari: A Biographical Sketch", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 3 (4), 1967, pp. 633-646; R Law, "The Career of Adele at Lagos and Badagry c.1807- c.1837", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* IX (2), 1978, pp. 35-60.

15 O Ikime, *Merchant Prince of the Niger Delta: The Rise and Fall of Nana Olomu – last Governor of the Benin River* (London, Heinemann, 1968), p. 218.

16 E A Ayandele, *Holy Johnson: Pioneer of African Nationalism, 1836-1917* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1970), p.417.

and “pioneer” of African nationalism, as well as the inclination to sweeping generalisations, serve to betray the author’s bias”.¹⁷

By 1979, however, it became clear that historians had started to recognise the lack of biographical works as part of the discipline’s repertoire. Ayandele of the University of Ibadan and later, Vice-Chancellor of University of Calabar upbraided Nigerian historians for being too enamoured “with impressing the white man that we have a distinctive and inspiring past and a culture that owed nothing to the white man’s activities in Africa...”.¹⁸ Thus, in his keynote address at the 24th Annual Conference of the Historical Society of Nigeria in Calabar, South-eastern Nigeria on 5 April 1979, he appealed for more biographies in the study of our collective past. He affirmed: “...What we should embark upon are detailed studies that would highlight the Nigerian genius in its variety and focus on political rulers and leaders of thought as transmitters of national values and ethos. We have so far failed to project recent Nigerian history around the leaders of society”.¹⁹

Ayandele’s call for more biographies was picked up by Obaro Ikime, Professor of History at Ibadan. In October 1979 while delivering his Inaugural Lecture at the university, he noted the unavailability of biographies in Nigeria’s national life,

Our failings in identifying and putting on record the men and women throughout the ages who have made significant contributions to their communities, their age, their country, is a veritable slur on our understanding of our functions as historians in a society which does not boast of novelists and journalists inclined to engage in the writing of biographies.²⁰

There was no doubt that Ikime sought to expand the repository of Nigerian biographies and to preserve the country’s history with the potential to educate the younger generation and thereby close the knowledge gap in Nigeria’s historiography.

Historians then began to give themselves the daunting task of helping to reveal or reinstate personalities whose contributions- positive or negative- have suffered acute neglect in historical scholarship. More historians became converted to the biography genre. J. F. Ade Ajayi, the doyen of the Ibadan School of History, picked up the gauntlet by publishing in 1992 “A Patriot to the

17 PO Esedebe, “Review: Holy Johnson”, *The Journal of African History* 13 (1), 1972, pp. 165-168.

18 EA Ayandele, “The Task before Nigerian Historians Today”, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* IX (4), 1979, p. 5.

19 Ayandele, “The Task before Nigerian Historians Today”, pp. 1-14.

20 O Ikime, “Through Changing Scenes: Nigerian History Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow”, University of Ibadan Inaugural Lecture, Ibadan: University of Ibadan, 1979, p. 20.

Core: Samuel Ajayi Crowther”, the biography of the slave boy who lived from 1809 – 31 December 1891 and rose to become the first black Anglican Bishop in Nigeria.²¹ He was not to publish his next biography until a decade later in 2002. He did this in conjunction with Yemi Akinseye-George, a Law Lecturer at the University of Ibadan. The work, entitled, *Kayode Eso: The Making of a Judge* chronicled the life of a man who served his country as a legal luminary and a Judge of Nigeria’s Supreme Court.²² In these works, as in his previous researches, Ajayi had followed his passion for historical inquiry with energy and thoroughness.²³

3. BIOGRAPHIES AND THE DILEMMAS OF SOURCES

Researching and telling the stories of men and women who have contributed to historical development is both an incredibly fascinating and engaging process. According to Banner:

Having written social and cultural history as well as biography, I propose that there are many similarities between these genres. At its best, biography, like history, is based on archival research, interweaves historical categories and methodologies, reflects current political and theoretical concerns, and raises complex issues of truth and proof...No sophisticated biographer any longer reduces life to a few categories or merely chronicles day-to-day experience, glossing over historical, literary, and geographical contexts”.²⁴

Thus, as it is traditional for every historical work, biographical works are based on field research and the use of documentary materials. Field research encompasses oral information, oral tradition, and closer interaction with ancillary sources. It is in the writing of biographies that one gets to appreciate the sources available to biographers and how these are analysed and utilised. The question is what moral judgements can researchers pass on the authenticity of one material or the other? It becomes more problematic when one acknowledges that the stories of the people handled have intersected with public offices, governments, and several families. Several impulses are known to have influenced actions in peculiar directions. Thus, excavating government and private archives have become standards for getting documents and other resources needed for historical reconstruction. You get

21 JF Ade Ajayi, *A Patriot to the Core: Samuel Ajayi Crowther* (Ibadan: Anglican Diocese, 1992), pp.79.

22 J F Ade Ajayi et al., *The Making of a Judge* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 2002).

23 RA Hess, “J. F. Ade Ajayi and the New Historiography in West Africa”, *African Studies Review* 14 (2), 1971, pp. 273-285.

24 Banner “Biography as History”, p. 580.

to meet with fabrications, some distortion of facts, selective memories. As a commentator noted "... In the service of mischief, facts can, of course, either be creatively twisted or exaggerated mindlessly..."²⁵ However, in several other respect, being very factual and detailed in the information provided can also constitute a pain in the neck for several people. All these have proved useful in biographical projects.

Western values, practices and systems of thought have not eclipsed the old inherited traditions of some of the indigenous groups, most notably among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria. Biographers usually fill in the gaps in their understanding of the lives and activities of their subjects through oral interviews and popular culture. But some Nigerian respondents of Yoruba origin still shy away from full disclosures as the dead are supposed to be allowed to rest in peace. It is essential to point out at this juncture that Yorubaland is the cultural complex that formed the focus of this essay, and some of the biographies referred to in this work. Yoruba traditional beliefs and perspectives have continued to influence the worldviews of the people and occasionally affect or influence access to information in both historical and biographical fields.

The assertion, "Don't speak ill of the dead" is part of the social reality that is still prevalent among the Yoruba people of Western Nigeria.²⁶ Although this no longer holds sway among a large section of the people, it still constitutes a landscape of memory in temporal and spiritual terms in Yoruba culture and history. More so, since the dead do not have the right to reply, some people believe that their actions and inactions, while they were alive, should be told in parables or idiom. The age-old warnings to refrain from "wicked acts so that the individual does not suffer indignities personally or expose his children and descendants to vengeance" have remained in place.²⁷ It was usually delivered in parables to help obliquely in the description of the dead.

25 *Carlumegboro.com*, 26 April 2020. available at: <https://carlumegboro.com/2020/04/26/wanted-vaccine-against-academic-covid-19>, accessed 2 June 2020.

26 Interview: Author with Hon. Barrister Femi Kehinde Esq, Ibadan, 20 June 2020. RE: His 2017 biography on S L Akintola entitled, *Samuel Ladoke Akintola: In the Eyes of History* (Ibadan: Akoosa Publishers Limited, 2017). [Hon Femi Kehinde published this book on the Nigerian politician discussed extensively below in which he adduced evidence that the man had a son out of wedlock. The book was launched on 10 July 2017. However, two of the man's children by the legal wife- Chief Abayomi Akintola and Ms Bimbo Akintola, filed a court action against Hon Kehinde for "publishing the book and defaming, Chief Akintola by saying he had a child out of wedlock. On the advice of the Learned Judge, reiterating the unalloyed legal view that you cannot defame a dead person; they had to withdraw the suit."]

27 I Olomola, "Contradictions in Yoruba Folk Beliefs Concerning Post-existence: The Ado Example", *Journal des Africanistes/Anne* 58 (1), 1988, pp. 107-118. For details about the Yoruba culture and society, see, NA Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970).

The pronouncements were then subtly no longer about the dead but for the benefits of the living. Only the discerning could look in-between the lines to understand the train of discussion.

African oral artistes have been quite useful in understanding the trains of thought of a section of the citizenry. They are real opinion moulders and changers of perceptions. Songs waxed for and against persons or ideas are popular and have become part of the repertoire of oral tradition useful in historical and biographical reconstruction. One of such songwriters/artistes/poets popular for this kind of work was Odolaye Aremu, a musician and songwriter from Ilorin, Kwara State of Nigeria. Abdul-Rasheed Na'Allah has worked on the usefulness of such songs and lyrics in Nigeria.²⁸ He noted:

Odolaye [Aremu] was notorious as a politically partisan poet from his Ilorin home [Kwara, North Central Nigeria] to every nook and corner of southwestern Nigeria. He was the poet of Akintola [the former Premier of Western Nigeria referred to later in this work], Lamidi Adedibu, and especially spent most of his time in Lagos and Ibadan singing for their politicians. During the political crisis in Southwest Nigeria in the First Republic [1960-1966] he pitched his tent with Akintola and many Yoruba people (most of who supported Chief Obafemi Awolowo) were said to have seen him as an enemy of the Yoruba people. Even when he sang for Yoruba Obas [traditional kings], his songs were always partisan, to the extent that many people accused him of fueling an air of discord among Yoruba Obas. He would praise the Alafin of Oyo, the Olubadan of Ibadan and the Owa Obokun of Ijesa and use suggestive words at a time there was a suspicion of a superiority fight between the other Kings on one side and the Ooni of Ife, on the other side (Owa Obokun Vs. Ooni, Alafin Vs. Ooni, for example). Yet, Odolaye's songs show that he was a very patriotic poet and loved his country deeply. He was only very tough on those he probably regarded in his own political convictions as enemies of Nigerian unity. Those who know his songs for Akintola would say he saw Chief Awolowo as a problem of the Yoruba and of the Nigerian unity and supported Akintola, not for selfish reasons but as a way of finding a solution.²⁹

The question of credibility is a big one in the writing of biographies. Authors can make the reader sympathetic to the views of the subject or hostile to him. Several critics have also observed the problem of the degree of forgetfulness and inaccuracies in people's recollections, especially when providing oral narratives. Passion also run high and may even take the form of deliberate distortions.

28 A Na'Allah, "Myth Making and Myth Breaking": Roles of A Hausa Singer: Nigeria and the Impact of Oral Tradition in Elections Politics for Change, 2011-2015". In: MA Makinde (ed.), *The Humanities and Societal Change* (Ibadan, Nigerian Academy of Letters, 2016): See also, *The Nation* (Lagos), 10 August 2016. <https://thenationonlineeng.net/menu-for-the-mind>, accessed 2 June 2020.

29 Na'Allah, "Myth Making".

4. TWO BIOGRAPHICAL WORKS: HISTORY ON TRIAL

Nigeria has provided the perfect laboratory for the dilemmas evoked by *Passing* in matters relating to biographies. She has provided an ideal platform for how biographies are regarded in Nigeria: “We are not sure whether we are judging the biography, assessing the biographer, evaluating the style and form, or passing judgement on the life of the central character”.³⁰ All these have happened to biographies written in Nigeria. But beyond these, getting sources have also been problematic.

Nigeria evolved as a country in 1914. It came into existence when colonial Northern and Southern Nigeria Protectorates were brought together by Lord Frederick Lugard – erstwhile colonial Governor of Northern Nigeria. The territory thus became the most significant British colony in West Africa. The country comprises of over 250 ethnic groups. It is positioned just north of the equator and south of the Sahara Desert. Since its independence from Britain in 1960, the oil-rich country has, however, moved from one crisis to another. The country has witnessed about ten successful and unsuccessful military coups with three heads of governments assassinated and almost three decades of military dictatorship.³¹

Despite Nigeria’s vast resources, wealth and advantages, the knowledge of the country and the records – both human and documentary- available for this are either incomplete or incomprehensible. The country’s political evolution has been extremely turbulent. The colonial administration had left the country with a fragile political system and a sense of mutual ethnic distrust.³² As a federation of three semi-autonomous regions – the North, East and West- the political parties that were in control of the areas were the Action Group (A.G.) in the West, The Northern People’s Congress (N.P.C.) in the North, and the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (N.C.N.C.) in the East.³³ The framework inherited at independence on 1 October 1960 had flaws which were the source of some of the conflicts and crises, which catalysed the collapse of the First Republic. Rivalries characterised the First Republic. This was propelled by the struggle for supremacy at the centre by the three major regional parties.

30 *Passing*, “Understanding Biographies”, p. 8.

31 M Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence: Nigeria’s Military Coup Culture 1966-1976* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2009), p. 1.

32 T Falola and J Ihonvbere, *The Rise and Fall of Nigeria’s Second Republic, 1979 – 84* (London: Zed Books, Ltd. 1985), p.18.

33 O Awolowo, *Awo: The Autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 187.

³⁴ In that kind of atmosphere, the country became extraordinarily fragmented and unstable.

Max Siollun, a historian, and commentator on Nigerian and governmental issues, remarked about that and its significance for historical reconstruction:

It is often said that history is written by victors. In many cases in Nigeria, history is not written at all. A combination of official reluctance to divulge past combustible events in a country permanently poised on an ethnic and religious powder keg, and the determination of the *dramatis personae* to avoid having their misdeeds exposed, means that early Nigerian post-independence history is in many places a collection of folk tales and fables.³⁵

He added further:

Most of the prior books on this time period were written by the protagonists, and their accounts are sometimes tainted by their embittered personal experiences and grievances. There is a substantial readership that desires a balanced, impartial and full account of that crisis racked decade.³⁶

Despite its late start, Nigeria's historical biographical scene has become a vibrant one. Over the years, it has remained faithful to its traditional role of projecting a principal personage, as well as archiving and documenting critical social and historical events. Nevertheless, the writing of contemporary biographies in the country has remained a highly contextual issue. A lot depends on memory and personal recollections in the reconstruction of both biographies and autobiographies. Every historical discourse, according to Hayden White, the American historian well-known for his works in the tradition of literary criticism and Metahistory, contains within it a full-blown, if only implicit, philosophy of History.³⁷ Even though White's ideas on the interpretation of History was on the relationship between History and the novel, the same view rings true of biographies. Biography can also represent the binary between History and literature. An accurate sense of chronology helps in situating and analysing issues and events. Nevertheless, the concern for historical objectivity always attends the writing of biographies using a multiplicity of sources. Interpretations of these diverse sources have caused serious disagreements.

34 EE Osaghae, *Nigeria Since Independence: Crippled Giant* (Ibadan: Programme on Ethnic and Federal studies, 2002), p. 36.

35 Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, p. 2.

36 Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, pp. 2-3.

37 H White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 126, 287.

Two highly significant biographies are examined here to explore the empirical practice of writing and reading biographies in Nigeria. The historical biographical works are on two members of Nigeria's political class, and these have become crucial in clearly essential ways. First, they form part of the commitment to the understanding between life experiences and history. Secondly, they provide some illumination to the discussions that the topic has generated above. Thirdly, they mirror the grievances in Nigeria's political, social, cultural, and psychological terrains because of the complex interplay of factors. These are works that have in one way or another mirrored several generations of anger, frustration and conflicts almost amounting to a blood feud. The biographies were written by the well-respected Ibadan-trained historian, Akinjide Osuntokun of the Department of History, University of Lagos, Nigeria. The narrative details, the subjects and the author became enmeshed in suspicion and antagonism. It was a classic case of biographies where the author became "complicit" in the character, story, and "misdeeds" of his subjects. The author's "identity" became co-extensive with that of the biographee in the minds of the people. In this case, the writing of the biographies of members of the political class even several years after their demise became a costly enterprise.

The first book is the one chronicling the life and times of the Premier of the old Western Nigeria, Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola (SLA) killed by the renegade soldiers from the Nigerian Army in the military coup of 1966.³⁸ The narrative surrounding the political and economic crises that attended the country's First Republic (1960-1966) and which finally ended the life of the Republic on 15 January 1966 revolved around the Premier. It began as an intra-party feud and power play.³⁹ Chief Akintola belonged to the A.G., the most popular and the then ruling party in Western Nigeria. He was also the deputy leader of the party. Before Akintola became the Premier of the Western region, Chief Awolowo, the party leader had served as the first Leader of Government Business and first Premier of the Western Region in the country's parliamentary system from 1952-1959. He also played a significant role in the constitutional conferences that led to Nigeria's independence in 1960. He left his post as Premier and ceded the position to Chief Akintola to become the Leader of Opposition from 1959-1963 in the country's first post-independence parliament. However, a gulf soon opened within the party, and the intra-party crisis led to a lot of unpleasant consequences.

38 A Osuntokun, *S. Ladoke Akintola: His Life and Times* (Great Britain: Frank Cass and Company Ltd. 1984); (The book was reprinted in 2010 By Mosuro Publishers, Ibadan).

39 Interview: Author with Prince Al Aderemi, Ile-Ife, 20 June 2020. RE: Politics of the Western Region in the 1960s. He is the son of the then Governor of the Western Region, Oba (Sir) Adesoji Tadeniawo Aderemi.

The Leader of the A.G. Chief Awolowo, on 19 May 1962, at the party's annual convention accused Akintola of mal-administration, antiparty activities and gross indiscipline.⁴⁰ On 20 May 1962, the Federal Executive Committee and the Parliamentary Committee of the A.G. endorsed the motion to remove Chief Akintola as the Party's Deputy Leader and to demand his resignation as the Premier of the Western Region. Akintola refused to abide by this decision. Chief Akintola and Chief Ayo Rosiji, the Federal Secretary of the party, walked out of the convention in the face of severe ideologically motivated criticism.⁴¹ This episode led to disturbances in the Western House of Assembly on 25 May 1962.⁴² That crisis led to the declaration of a state of emergency in the region.⁴³ A worse crisis was to follow.

The crisis degenerated into the party dissolving into factions. A chain of events in the Western Region ultimately resulted in a tragedy of immense proportions.⁴⁴ The acrimonious relationship within the party and in the region saw the leader of the Party, Chief Awolowo and jailed by the Northern Peoples' Congress (N.P.C.)-led Federal Government for treasonable felony. The Federal Government, it was then perceived by the people of Western Nigeria, had entered the fray in the West on the side of Chief Akintola's faction. The splinter group led by Akintola subsequently created a new party known as the Nigerian National Democratic Party (N.N.D.P.).⁴⁵ The party became derisively known as *Demo*, a negative description of those who belonged to Akintola's political persuasion.

In a political arrangement that crystallised in December 1964, the Akintola faction appeared to have been favoured to retain power. Those in opposition to Akintola accused him and his new party of blatantly rigging the Western Region elections in 1965 that enabled him to maintain control to the chagrin of the other faction of the A.G. The elections that took place in the region was boycotted and bitterly resented. Although Chief Akintola won the election and went back into office as Premier, his triumph pitched the general

40 DR Smock and K Bents-Enchill, *The Search for National Integration in Africa* (London, The Free Press, 1965), p. 47.

41 For details of the rupture, see *West Africa*, 10-17 February 1962, pp. 158 and 187. See also, RL Sklar, *Nigerian Political Parties: Power in an Emergent African Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p.281.

42 *West Africa* (London), 25 May 1962, p. 579.

43 A Alao, "Constitutional Development, Sub-nationalism and the Political Process in Nigeria". In : A Alao (ed.), *The Nigerian State: Language and Its Politics. Essays in Honour of Stephen Oladipo Arifalo* (Ibadan, Rex Charles, 2005), pp. 9-10.

44 B Dudley, *An Introduction to Nigerian Government and Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p.367.

45 OA Adesina, "Democratisation and Post-Election Conflicts in Nigeria Since Independence: A Historical Reconsideration". In: A Adebayo (ed), *Managing Conflicts in Africa's Democratic Transitions* (Maryland, Lexington Books, 2012), p. 57.

populace against him. The bloodshed that followed the massive rioting in the region went down in history as the most horrendous in the annals of the country. It was a crisis that earned the area the unenviable sobriquet of “Wild, Wild West”. The actions of the Federal Government “were interpreted to mean a grand design to eliminate the authentic mouthpiece of the West from the mainstream of Nigerian politics. The net effect was that many of the people of the Western Region felt cheated...”⁴⁶ The people resented the subordination of the people of the Western Region in the national scheme of things. Chief Akintola was held responsible for this. He then became a pariah among a broad cross-section of the people of the Western Region.

There broke out a massive revolt against the Akintola-led government in the West, which led to a breakdown of law and order. The Nigerian Army had to intervene to restore law and order by overthrowing the country's democratically elected government in the country. Chief Akintola was one of those penned down for elimination by the coup plotters of January 1966.⁴⁷ By then, he had acquired notoriety as a wily and combative politician who stood against the people and progressive development in the region. Before his death, on 15 January 1966 Chief Akintola had been demonised by the local press and members of the opposition as a very vindictive politician. Osuntokun's book, based on a multiplicity of sources, was an attempt to document the story of Chief Akintola from a more favourable perspective. Unfortunately, the book had to contend with prevalent views and the regurgitation of the stories of the mid-1960s, a period when Chief Akintola held sway. Even then, several commentators agreed that Akintola was a man with an acerbic wit and political deftness.⁴⁸ But this was not enough to endear him to the people. Many people chose to remember his political career as one that succeeded in splitting the people of the West into pro- and anti-Akintola forces. In January 1966, less than six years after the attainment of political independence, Nigeria became buffeted by widespread disillusionment with the government that was considered corrupt and incapable of maintaining law and order.⁴⁹ This was the background in which several people viewed the writing of Chief Akintola's biography. It was a daunting task.

The book by Osuntokun on Akintola went public in 1984. Even Ayandele, the Professor of History at the University of Ibadan who wrote the foreword to the biographical work praised Osuntokun for his audacity in “choosing a

46 Alao, “Constitutional Development”, p. 10.

47 Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, p. 41.

48 *The Scoop*, 18 January 2016.

49 *Aljazeera*, 30 May 2020. <https://www-aljazeera-com.cdn.ampproject.org/v/s/www.aljazeera.com/amp/indepth/opinion/remebering-father-biafra-politics-erasing-history-200529083216558.html?>, accessed 31 May 2020.

terrain upon which angels would fear to tread". He added that the enigma, which Akintola represented and which also manifested in his multifaceted personality complete with "his charm, affableness, saccharine smile and suave exterior" was not adequate to judge the man. He added that just as Osuntokun had done, future researchers would use "yet-to-be-unbowelled archival materials, as well as the testimony of living contemporaries of SLA who knew him intimately, will fill some of the gaps in our present-day knowledge of this astute politician and a talented orator."⁵⁰ The biography of Chief Akintola was a politically explosive work. Osuntokun was harangued for writing the book. Much of the criticisms came from his academic constituency and Akintola's opponents. So, just as Akintola's life, times and political career had divided several groups between 1960 and 1966, his biography was divisive and contentious. Ayodeji Olukoju, an Ibadan-trained historian and Professor of History at the University of Lagos, gave an insight into the reactions to the Akintola book. He asserted: "...another group and I was one of them, vilified him for being a "Demo" for daring to write the Akintola book".⁵¹ Thus, to many people, Akintola, and anyone associated with him directly or indirectly, must belong to that rare breed of people who opposed the progress of the Yoruba people. Although this may sound like an empirical generalisation, there was a way in which the voices of the anti-Akintola elements rose to drown whatever came out of the Akintola camp.

The reactions that emerged from Osuntokun's exploration of the life and times of another political leader followed the same trajectory as the Akintola book. In this way, the labour and techniques devoted to the other biographical work also tended to increase rather than decrease the criticism of the historical analytic tools deployed in the reconstruction of a man's life and times. Osuntokun had once again become involved in a fascinating and highly regarded biography of a very controversial personality Chief Festus Samuel Okotie-Eboh.⁵² The biography of Okotie-Eboh, Nigeria's post-independence Minister of Finance in the First Republic (1960-1966) became another issue of contention. The book entitled: "Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh: In His Times and Space" was presented to the public at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs in Lagos, Nigeria in January 2016, to mark the 50th anniversary of

50 EA Ayandele, "Foreword". In: A. Osuntokun, *S. Ladoke Akintola: His Life and Times* (Great Britain: Frank Cass and Company Ltd. 1984); See also, OC Adesina (ed.), *Nigeria in the Twentieth Century: History, Governance and Society* (Ibadan: Connel Publications, 2017), p.19.

51 Remarks by A Olukoju at the Fourth Roundtable of the Organisation for Historical Research in Nigeria, McPherson University, Seriki-Sotayo, Ogun State of Nigeria, 30 January 2014. Also quoted in OC Adesina, *Nigeria in the Twentieth Century*, p. 20.

52 J. Osuntokun, *Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh: In Times and Space 1912-1966* (Ibadan: B. Editions, 2016), p.409.

his assassination by the Nigerian Army in 1966. The work chronicled the life, times, and philosophies of the Nigerian politician. It provided historical insights into the career, speeches, and personality of the famous politician. The life and times of the man who was also killed along with the Prime Minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa and the Western Region Premier, Chief S.L.A Akintola in the country's first military in January 1966 rekindled the sense of anger felt by many against that period in Nigerian history. It became a significant pointer to how history and politics intersect in a highly politicised environment. The book was an authorised biography of a political figure who was one of the targets of the five army Majors that toppled the democratically elected post-independence administration.

The story that emerged in the biography was one that was haunted by past anger and suspicions surrounding the personality of Chief Okotie-Eboh. Earlier in 2012, a commentator had asked rhetorically in a newspaper article, "When will Nigeria stop this unfairness to Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh?" The commentator had then chronicled the "great" works accomplished by the man as a Federal Minister. These, he argued, were enough reasons for him to "be granted a posthumous award".⁵³ Thus, when assessed against this background, and with the popular narratives about the politician, the labour devoted to rewriting the story of Chief Okotie-Eboh appeared to some, as an attempt to "deodorise" the man's image. One of Okotie-Eboh's children had affirmed: "We felt we would be doing well in his name and Nigeria when we lay out the truth about who he was for a better tomorrow. He was a patriot. What then is the making of F. S. Okotie-Eboh? That is what 15 January 2016 would deal with. What was the making of this man, who was he? What did he stand for? What was his early life? Why was he referred to as an enigma?"⁵⁴

The assumption was that Chief Okotie-Eboh was already too wealthy to fall victim of filthy lucre. He was also considered a success in the business sector before coming into politics. Based on his entrepreneurship skills and creation of employment, he was appointed the first Minister of Labour in 1955.⁵⁵ The author also described him as a grassroots politician and a bridge builder who connected effectively with the conservative northern political class. But despite this flowery description of a remarkable man known for his political astuteness Okotie-Eboh's memory still had to contend with the damning pronouncements of the military.

53 *Vanguard* (Lagos), 31 December 2012. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/12/when-will-nigeria-stop-this-unfairness-to-chief-festus-okotie-eboh>, accessed 30 May 2020.

54 *The Guardian* (Lagos), 13 January 2016. <https://m.guardian.ng/art/book-on-life-times-of-okotie-eboh-for-launch-on-friday>, accessed 30 May 2020.

55 Chief Okotie-Eboh's daughter, Dere Awosika, quoted in, *The Guardian* (Lagos), 13 January 2016.

On 15 January 1966, Major Kaduna Nzeogwu, the leader of Nigeria's military coup in his speech to the nation, had criticised the ousted leaders in very uncomplimentary ways. He stated among other things:

...The aim of the Revolutionary Council is to establish a strong united and prosperous nation, free from corruption and internal strife...Our enemies are the political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand 10% those that seek to keep the country divided permanently so that they can remain in offices as ministers or VIPs at least, the tribalists, the nepotists, those that make the country look big for nothing before international circles, those that have corrupted our society and put the Nigerian political calendar back by their words and deeds.⁵⁶

This speech was popular with the citizenry and had been cloned or plagiarised by successive coup speeches since 1966.

Unfortunately for the author, the family, and the memory of Okotie-Eboh, there was too much history and negative public opinions, most notably of corruption and malfeasance in high places to contend with where the subject of the book was concerned. Okotie-Eboh's image painted by the author and his children as a man with the Midas touch and a fierce nationalist paled into insignificance when placed side by side with the brush of corruption used to tar him and his colleagues by the military boys that overthrew their government in 1966. The accusation of fraud that germinated during the period has unfortunately refused to abate. Tekena Tamuno, a historian of the Ibadan School of History and one-time Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan, had asserted that: "Corruption is to Nigeria's body politic what potent cancer or carcinogenic substance is to human health".⁵⁷ Corruption became so widespread in the country that it sucked out the essence of the country. It created a significant moral confusion that ensured that the country became unable to achieve any form of sustainable progress.⁵⁸ The protracted nature of corruption and economic malaise that have continued to assail Nigeria was identifiable with the period of Okotie-Eboh as Nigeria's Minister of Finance. Sam Omatseye, a national commentator, and columnist seemed to have apprehended the fault lines in the public narrative surrounding Okotie-Eboh without necessarily agreeing with the dominant narrative:

56 "Speech of Major Nzeogwu – Declaration of Martial Law in Northern Nigeria, January 15, 1966", Reproduced In: Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence: Nigeria*.

57 T Tamuno, "Quo Vadis, Nigeria? Answers from the House of Lords and the House of Commons Since Independence". In: *The House of Lords, Nigeria: The Challenges of Growth and Development. In-depth Analysis by Expert* (Ibadan: The House of Lords, 2016), p. 165.

58 OC Adesina, "The Conflict Between Nigeria and Nigerians: A Review of Richard Bourne's Book", Presented at the Ibadan School of Government and Public Policy (ISGPP) Book Reading Event, Ibadan, 28 September 2017.

...Okotie-Eboh, known as *Omimi Ejo*, was glamour as a politician. Yet all we remember of this man was that he shepherded First Republic finances and was slaughtered savagely as well as Prime Minister Balewa. The panellists [at the colloquium on Okotie-Eboh at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs in Lagos on 15 January 2016] showed that the Omimi Ejo's narrative had been skewed by the false heroism of the Majors, especially Kaduna Nzeogwu's 10 per cent speech. So, if he was finance minister, he was the chief 10 percenter.⁵⁹

His next gambit was to appeal to people to stop linking Okotie-Eboh with corruption and the criminalisation of the state and "as part of the vast sweep of that event" that went on in the 1960s but as "a visionary, patriot, bureaucrat, technocrat, parliamentarian, business mogul, cosmopolitan". But in making his comments, he made oblique references to the cataclysm of the period and how these became entwined with rather than displace the common narrative when he opined: "They [the military boys of January 1966] exploited the frustration of the average Nigerian to satiate a lust for power".⁶⁰ This prevailing thinking seems to have fitted a more useful description of the period dealing with so many emotions, including poverty and dispossession. It was instead a confirmation of the fact that people will not for a long time lose sight of the occurrences of the period. It becomes challenging to absolve the politicians of the period from the roles they played in the unhappiness of the period and the subsequent collapse of the democracy of Nigeria's First Republic in January 1966. So, whether that identity change will occur or not is left for the future. But this will be in conjunction with a hopeful shift in the nature and effects of the historical narratives of future researchers and analysts.

5. IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE ANCESTORS

When you deal with a personality or life as a historian, all the tools of historical science must come into play. That was what I discovered in my foray into the writing of biographies. Beyond the extraordinary events or episodes recorded against a personality, the social and cultural ramifications are also of immense value. It is an article of faith that the biographer "should not fear to find certain small things significant".⁶¹ It became evident to me in the late 1990s when I became a systematic student of biography. This illuminating experience occurred when I worked with Jacob Festus Ade Ajayi, Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Ibadan as a contributing scholar to submit entries on some African personalities to John Middleton's

59 *The Scoop*, 18 January 2016.

60 *The Scoop*, 18 January 2016.

61 Reid, "Practical Biography", p. 362.

Encyclopedia of sub-Saharan Africa.⁶² But what I assumed was going to be comfortable and straightforward entries turned out at the end of the exercise to be rigorously researched pieces. Ajayi had gone through the works several times, recommending corrections and updating them. That training opened my eyes to the rigour and fascination of working on biographies. In-between that initial foray into small biographical works and my first major biographical work, I worked closely with other professors of History on one project or the other.⁶³ One of these was the invitation by Deji Ogunremi, professor of history at the Lagos State University to work with him on the history project of an Anglican Church Cathedral at Kudeti, Ibadan. The work also contained a sizeable number of biographical elements. The rigour of going through church documents prepared me for my first major assignment on biographies.⁶⁴

The greater appreciation of biographies in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the desire for raising important questions of societal change created a broader market for more biographies. I was equally intrigued by previous works of biographies by academic historians. As more biographies by journalists and the general practitioners began to fly off publication lines, I also began to get involved in the writing of biographies not only as building blocks of History but also as tools to understand society better and those who helped in its creation. I became involved in four major ones between 2000 and 2018 and a few minor ones between 2018 and 2019. These works brought me close to clergies, broadcasters, diplomats, judges, politicians, academics, bankers, and the public.⁶⁵

Working on biographies have their historical values. Not only does a biographer begin to have extensive knowledge of his or her subjects, but the field produces comprehensive insights into traits that ultimately determine the outcomes of the works. They also reflect a great deal about people. This has been adumbrated by Possing who outlined the most pressing methodological issues in writing biographies:

62 OC Adesina, (Contributing scholar): "Abuja"; "Adama Modibbo"; "Cameroon-Gabon Region, History"; "Du Bois, W.E.B ; Ekoi ; Hausa"; "Ibadan"; "Ilorin"; "Lagos"; "Macaulay, Herbert"; "Nigerian Peoples and Culture: Northwestern Nigeria". In: J Middleton (ed) *Encyclopedia of sub-Saharan Africa* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1998).

63 OC Adesina, *Prince, Professor, Patriot*, pp. xxix, 377; OC Adesina, *Clement Nyong Isong: A Life of Integrity, Discipline and Public Service* [Nigeria's Second Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria] (Uyo: Siene Books and The Clement Isong Foundation, 2018), p.363.

64 D Ogunremi and OC Adesina, *The Cathedral Church of Saint David, Kudeti, Ibadan* (Ibadan: The Diocese of Ibadan South Anglican Communion, 2003).

65 OC Adesina, *Gideon Isaac Olajide Olajide: The Making of the People's Bishop* (Ijebu-Ode: VICOO International Press, 2000), p.170; OC Adesina, *The World of Yemi Farounbi* (Oshogbo: Sumob Publishers, 2004), p. 210.

Journalists, authors, and academics who embark upon writing a biography will quickly discover that the skill required is more complex than might first be thought. They will also realise that the art of writing biography is not a simple and straightforward one, because the task poses more questions than it answers: What is the specific relevance of this specific person that warrants the writing of their biography? Who would find it significant, and why? How shall this life be told? Upon which sources will it be constructed in order to form an authentic narrative?⁶⁶

There is no doubt that a critical examination of the foregoing would greatly facilitate how a biographical work is shaped.

During the period of my schooling, I was engaged at different times in field works, oral interviews, and archival research since they were in the modes of historical biographies. In dealing with these, I had to engage specific issues. First was the need to clearly define *ab initio*, the focus, scope, and boundaries of the project and what exact purposes the work was to serve. Secondly, how well would the freedom of thought and expression come into play? Thirdly, what kind of materials were available or accessible for the works and where.

The methodology for biographical works in Nigeria required an adept use of historical and ethnographical approaches and cultural probes. These have involved empirically focused community-based participatory methods such as the use of oral tradition, oral sources, and site visits. A beneficial approach in eliciting information for biographical works, cultural probes provide data about the lives and thoughts of the indigenous people. However, this approach has remained a widely challenging one due to the quantum of information yielded from moving from one community or group to the other.

I took the issue of biography seriously and self-consciously. Cultural lines of communication and contemporary moments mixed to elicit information from those who should know. The historian/biographer in Africa must borrow copiously from Anthropology. So, just like the anthropologist, the biographer must relate significantly with the "lifeworlds that unfold themselves through the interplay of everyday practices and manifold interventions, motions and messages of humans, ancestors and non-human agents, visible and invisible worlds. All this may unfold in interactive and culture-specific...sites of emerging meaning production and innovative world-making".⁶⁷

Many parts of Africa, even despite modernity, are not so much divorced from their pre-colonial past.⁶⁸ Despite this, it was not strange that a few of the respondents who have maintained cultural codes and kinship relations

66 Posing, "*Understanding Biographies*", p. 8.

67 *Codesria Bulletin* (1&2), 2008, p.2.

68 J Lonsdale, "The Emergence of African Nations: A Historiographical Analysis", *African affairs* 67 (266), 1968, p. 23.

consistently refrained from commenting on people or issues. Perhaps, it was in line with this that Michael Holroyd referred to what he called creative secrecy. This includes evasions of the living, their prevarications, sentimentalities, silences and lies.⁶⁹ In some cases, it was difficult to elicit information about dead persons as people are sometimes reluctant to “speak ill of the dead”. Those who do not shy away from cultural precepts often speak either in coded languages or parables that may depend on an understanding of the culture. After all, among the Yoruba of Southwest Nigeria, the *Oba* (traditional king) does not die; he sleeps. Nobody will admit to you that the king is dead. We have also encountered others who in the context of modern beliefs and perspectives, repudiated cultural codes to express their innermost feelings. One gets to hear ripostes such as “That man is wicked”, “I cannot say much about him or her because she/he is arrogant and standoffish”, “He/She was useless to the community”.

The documents from the National Archives in Nigeria located at Ibadan, Enugu and Kaduna have also proved extremely useful. The repositories have yielded colonial papers, government reports and gazettes, and newspaper and periodicals collections. The official documents of the Federal, Regional, State governments, papers of Native and Local authorities, semi-public bodies and institutions, private individuals, and families, and those of ecclesiastical organisations and missions are also available at the Ibadan Archives.⁷⁰ However, after suffering from years of neglect, underfunding, poor records management and a host of other nefarious activities, the documents have either become brittle, were misaligned, got stolen or were unavailable. These have become extremely frustrating for the hardworking officials who were still dependent on the manual approach to records and archives administration. Unfortunately, this odious situation has resulted in the emergence of a spectral economy within the Nigerian Archives that must be courted, pampered, or negotiated. A more viable alternative is the migrated archives available at the National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom. While consulting the documents has become a very costly venture, it yields more well-preserved and readily available records. In every case, the resources in the university libraries and World Wide Web resources have become extremely useful.

My foray into biographical works has brought me in contact with clergymen, academics, entrepreneurs, bankers, and politicians. In all, the most passionate reactions had always been reactions involving the members of the political class. Prioritising self-gains over the collective, the message from the citizenry had usually come out clearly that “we did not benefit anything”

69 M Holroyd, “What Justifies Biography?”, *The Threepenny Review* 89, 2002, pp. 16-17.

70 S Heap, “The Nigerian National Archives, Ibadan: An Introduction for users and A Summary of Holdings”, *History in Africa* 18, 1991, pp. 159-172.

- a euphemism for not directly and personally gaining anything from the man or woman who held a political office. It does not matter whether the man or woman developed useful infrastructure in the community or not. It defined the perception of the citizenry, which the biographer must handle very carefully to know where the interest of the collective starts and where those of personal aggrandisement stops. The overarching argument is that a better understanding of social relations and cultural complexes is a *sine qua non* for a critique of the intersections of the self, collective and progress among many African groups. Thus, oral information, if not well dissected, would merely result in works that may not amount to more than useless chronicles.

6. BIOGRAPHY IN THE CONTEXT OF ENDANGERED ARCHIVES

Archives are the principal drivers that shape biographical and historical works.⁷¹ Apart from the archives of memory readily available in society, there must be ample supply of documentary evidence to support rigorous research work. In other words, one must depend on a variety of sources to produce critical and dependable work. The most challenging task for any biographer is how to source the documents. The University of Ibadan has a section for *Special Collections* at its Kenneth Dike Library. Essential papers and documents deposited there included Akinpelu Obisesan's (the famous Ibadan Cocoa merchant) papers, Bishop Charles Phillips (the superintendent of Anglican Church in eastern Yorubaland with base in Ondo), Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (the fiery nationalist and women leader), and the papers of the nationalist, Herbert Macaulay. Others have also taken the pains to develop personal archives and libraries within their expansive homes. These include the Ogunsheye Archives and Library in Bodija, Ibadan, the Jadeas Trust Library and archives belonging to the Late Emeritus Professor J. F. Ade Ajayi. Perhaps, one of the most complex personal archives is the Sopolu Library established by the Late Sage, Chief Obafemi Awolowo on his Ikenne, Ogun state property.

Unfortunately, several individual archives have remained inaccessible. Families are no longer depositing their papers in public archives, and neither are they establishing a private one. There has developed a new generation that no longer pays a premium to the preservation of personal records. While a couple of the families worked on keeping family papers and documents intact, one instance proved tough and challenging. The material for my subject in a case had been taken away a decade earlier by someone who had

71 For more details, see, L Witz, "Archives, Museums and Autobiography: Reflections on Write Your Own History (With a Small Detour to the University of Bophuthatswana)", *Southern Journal for Contemporary History* 44 (2), pp. 4-28.

initially embarked on the biographical project and after some disagreements, abandoned the project but never returned the documents. It took my relating with the archives in the United Kingdom and the United States to get the work done. Another family had, after the demise of the patriarch of the family thought his old papers and diaries had become useless and proceeded to throw away these precious papers and documents. My research assistant later salvaged only a few of the documents from the dump outside the house. The papers had become severely degraded and mouldy.

7. CONCLUSION

Biographies have succeeded in bringing academics to the turbulence of engaging in research in a critically diverse society. Although the number of people involved in the genre is now on the increase, there is a need to train a younger generation in handling biographical matters with all seriousness. To prepare the next generation of historians for service in the field, the Department of History at Ibadan has developed a strategic development plan, which has refocused and re-positioned the academic programmes for the challenges of the 21st century. It introduced in 2019 new three-unit undergraduate courses. One of the three-unit courses added to the curriculum was a course on *Biographical Studies and Self-Writing*. The course involves an in-depth study of biographies, autobiographies, and self-writing as a mirror into the study of individuals and their engagement with the larger society. It articulates various causal factors that led to the actions of individuals and leadership skills during their lifetime.⁷² The classroom experience would hopefully lead to a better understanding of the challenges associated with the writing of biographies.

72 University of Ibadan, *Department of History Students' Handbook and Brochure* (Ibadan: Department of History, 2019), pp. 29-30.