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## Remembering Adiele Afigbo (Memorial Tribute to Professor Adiele Ebereegbulam Afigbo), 1938-2009

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## Remembering Adiele Afigbo, 1938-2008

By

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**THERE CAN BE NO GAINSAYING THE FACT** that Professor Adiele Ebergbulam Afigbo was one of the most outstanding African historians of our time. Wise, loving, and humble to a fault, he rose to his formidable global reputation through his training in Africa's oldest school of postcolonial historiography—the University of Ibadan. Perspicacious, clear-headed, and uncompromisingly loaded with facts and nothing but the facts of history, the world of learning is indebted to him for the establishment of African history as a respectable academic discipline and field of scholarly research through his pioneering contributions (since the 1960's) of several books and monographs as well as countless articles, chapters in books, review articles, book reviews, short notes and queries in scholarly historical and Africana studies publications.

At Ibadan, where (as acknowledged in his monograph, *K. O. Dike and the African Historical Renaissance*, Owerri, 1986) he was a student of the legendary father of modern African historiography and from where (with Professor Murray Last of the University College, London) he earned one of the first two PhDs offered by the university, he cultivated and refined the principles of oral historiography—the method of correlating oral tradition with archival and other documentary sources in historical reconstruction. His 1965 doctoral thesis, published in 1972 as *The Warrant Chiefs: Indirect Rule in South-Eastern Nigeria, 1891-1929*, was the first fruit of this historical methodology, a methodology that underpins his subsequent work (e.g. *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*, 1981; *The Igbo and Their Neighbors: Inter-Group Relations in Southeastern Nigeria to 1953*, 1987; *An Outline of Igbo History*, 1986; and his Ahiajoku Lecture, *The Age of Innocence: The Igbo and Their Neighbors in Pre-Colonial Times*, 1981). We can also see the same vein of excellence in his design and personal contributions to

one of his *magna opera*, *Groundwork of Igbo History*, 1992. Through his teaching, mentoring, supervision and collaborative work with junior academic colleagues and a whole generation of other younger historians who came under his tutelage over the years, a distinctive Afigbo School of Modern African History has emerged and flourishes today at Nsukka and elsewhere to which his students have carried his influences. The power and perspicacity of the Afigbo School can be gleaned from various *festschriften* presented to him since his retirement from the University of Nigeria, by the late Professor Ogbuu Kalu and others. Today we can relish the full flavor of his complete works from the two-volume collection, edited by Toyin Falola and recently published by Africa World Press.

The Afigboesque historical methodology is fundamental in the deconstruction of the untold story of British colonialism in Africa, in the diagnosis of the growth of colonial mentality in postcolonial Africa, and in the understanding of the bases of postcolonial African cultural nationalisms and related struggles for the decolonization of the African mind. This scholarship is far too vast to be reviewed in the present tribute. But, at the heart of the Afigbo method is a well-deserved contempt for what he calls “bastard historiography” (1993). Writing with uncompromising realism and steadfast adherence to the cold and empirical facts of history in essays such as “The Poverty of African Historiography (1977) and “Fact and Myth in Nigerian Historiography” (1983), he chastises the excesses of sentimental Afrocentrists who seek to rewrite African history by adorning it with the halo of unproven past greatness. In these and other essays on postcolonial historical methodology (among them “Colonial Historiography”, in Falola, 1993, and “The Anthropology and Historiography of Central-South Nigeria Before and Since Igbo-Ukwu”, in *History in Africa*, 22, 1996), he boldly states his dispassionate interest in holding the mirror faithfully to the past without romantic idealization, a commitment which acquits him of any accusation of pandering to colonial ideology or kowtowing to the myth of the civilizing mission of European colonialism in Africa. This overriding commitment to the simplest and most direct statement of the unvarnished truth about our past is one of the many attributes that have endeared him to scholars beyond the frontiers of the discipline of history.

Like many others in my generation, I owe an immense and immeasurable debt of gratitude to the exemplary dedication to scholarship and creativity of Professor Afigbo, my high school literature

master, my quintessential model of the self-made man, who before our very eyes in high school class rooms suddenly overcame stuttering by sheer will-power to become an eloquent speaker in public forums. My heart pulsates with gratitude and love as I remember this seeker after the highest spiritual truths who taught me face to face as well as in letters and emails how to seek perfection without being tied up by the lethargy of perfectionism, who in his brief forays into public service epitomized the honesty that still remains a rare gem in the beautiful land of our fathers that has been repeatedly traumatized by the actions of empty and visionless men and women bereft of the altruism which he epitomizes.

As he stands on the threshold of joining our ancestors and departed loved ones in further experiencing the wonders of creation, I salute his optimum fulfillment of the wonderful *eke* he created for himself for his concluded earthly incarnation. But I see no loss in his passing, for he shall surely return, more beautiful than ever before.

*Eze-dị-oha-mma,  
Ezigbo nwanne m nwoke eze-obioma;  
Adiele, eze mara mma obi maa mma ahụ;  
Eze-ahụrụ-kwe,  
Biko, laa n'udo;  
Biko, nọdu mma!*