



10.5281/zenodo.10990879

Vol. 07 Issue 03 March - 2024

Manuscript ID: #01310

BOLAJI AKINYEMI: AN “INTER-LECTUAL” OR JUST AN INTELLECTUAL?

By

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Abstract

Bolaji Akinyemi's enigmatic personality and his perceptive understanding of foreign policy issues has compelled an interrogation into his disciplinary status and academic expertise in the field of international relations. His versatility in the social sciences has incommoded the controversy of specialization in the academia. Akinyemi's prodigy drives international affairs into the route of international relations thus energizing a healthy debate on the radicalization of various academic disciplines which possess the potential for contending collision. This paper provides a nexus for orthodoxy and idealism, radicalism and conservatism, realism and liberalism. Adopting the analytical approach, the paper submits that conceptual comprehensibility is an elixir for classificatory appropriateness.

Akinyemi's disputations in many of his work in and outside the academia are sufficient to categorize him as an inter-lectual.

Keywords

Inter-lectual, Conceptual Comprehensibility, Debate, Conservatism, International Affairs.



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Introduction

Doing a study of this significance on Bolaji Akinyemi without this kind of polemical debate would be unjust and unfair to his personality and intellection. No doubt, intellectualism is about academic rigour, ideational engagement, theoretical and conceptual interpretation and epistemological investigation. However, as a preamble, I contend that in the field of international relations, the appropriate appellation for a professional should be “inter-lectual”. I am throwing up this controversy because until now, a specialist in international relations or an international relations analyst did not have the privilege of any universal professional appellation.

This is strange because an expert in Linguistics is labeled “Linguist”, the one in History is called “Historian”, the specialist in Law is called a “Lawyer”, the one in Botany is called “Botanist”. The specialist in medicine is called a “Doctor”, a knowledgeable person in economics is labeled “economist”; an expert in political science is called a “political scientist” and somebody who studied psychology is referred to as a “Psychologist”. This goes on and on. I submit therefore that if heaven did not fall, and has not fallen, since all these professionals were given these labels, why should there be any fear of the heaven falling in honouring a professional in international relations with the label “inter-lectual”. Who then is an “inter-lectual” or what is “inter-lectualism?” “Inter-lectual” will be the noun and “Inter-lectualism” will also serve as noun while “inter-lectualize” will be the verb.

What is inter-lectualism? It means the knowledge of the science, mechanics, dialectics and technology of international relations, international system and international politics and the expertise for applicatory techniques in interpreting relevant theories and concepts without which there is no “inter-lectualism”. So, the “inter-lectual” is someone who is an expert in the science and technology of international relations, international politics and international system. By this, it means technically, semantically and polemically, you must have some grounding in the history, philosophy, sociology and anatomy of international relations. It also connotes that international relations is not international affairs. International relations is about systems and political economy of globalism. On the other hand, international affairs is about the history and currency of global events.

In his book, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, John Hospers clarifies the distinction between “know” and “knowing how” – which he calls ability.¹ So, you must not only know, you must know how. The intellectual may know international relations but he lacks the “know how” of the “inter-lectual”. This explains my obligatory intervention on intellectual and “inter-lectual”. The intellectual knows but lacks the know how. The “inter-lectual” knows and also knows how because he is an expert in the field. In short, he is the expert and the specialist in international relations. That is his primary constituency. As for the intellectual who is a specialist or expert in another field or discipline, international relations is his secondary constituency.

But even within my own conceptual framework, I may be accused of smuggling in a professor of political science as an “interlectual” when he is naturally and professionally designated political scientist. True, Akinyemi calls himself Professor of Political Science in his curriculum vitae, not granting him a special status in “inter-lectualism” will be inexplicably unjust. Whatever repugnance or contrariety those who object to this categorization may have against Akinyemi does not obviate the fact that Akinyemi has established himself as a celebrated international relations expert of international recognition with almost a hundred publications to his credit. These include articles in reputable international journals whose subjects have stimulated global intellectual logomachy.² Most of Akinyemi’s work have the depth and profundity associated with great thinkers like Henry

Kissinger (Realist), Stanley Hoffman (Liberal theorist) and Andrew Linklater (A critical/radical theorist). As United States Secretary (1973-1977), Kissinger attempted to implement a new “realist” approach to the conduct of foreign affairs and some of the alleged shortcomings of realism are often illustrated by some of his policies.³

Conversely, Akinyemi’s ‘realist’ approach to the conduct of Nigeria’s foreign policy in a way that suggested a tilt towards the West, attracted wrathful criticisms and protestation from radical scholars and leftist apologists. They were wearied of and worried by obvious infiltration of western values and influence on the direction and management of the country’s foreign policy.⁴ No doubt, Akinyemi had courted sumptuous controversies with his western ideological mantra, there is no scholar with such surplus endowments that will allow the diminution of his cerebral products by a college of persecuting antagonists in academic gowns.

Prof. Akinwande Bolaji Akinyemi was born in Ilesha, Osun State, Nigeria, on 4 January 1942. His father was from Ifewara in Osun State while his mother was from Ekiti State. He moved to Lagos to stay with his grandmother on Queen Street, Alagomeji, in 1955 at the age of thirteen when he was admitted into the famous Igbobi College. He began his academic strides in Political Science at Temple University Philadelphia, receiving BA (1964) and also obtaining two M.A. degrees in International Affairs and Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, Massachusetts in 1965 and 1966 respectively. He received his Ph.D at the Trinity College, Oxford, in 1969 at the age of 27. His doctoral dissertation “Foreign Policy and Federalism” later published into a book by Macmillan in 1974 explores the drift of structural imperfections of the state in the conduct of a nation’s foreign policy suggesting that disharmonious activities of the sub-units in a federation are noxious to a cohesive and vibrant foreign policy.

CRUISING INTO CRISIS OF PROMINENCE

Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi’s ubiquitous involvement in the country’s statecraft spans 48 years taking off from when he became the Director General of the prestigious nation’s Think Tank Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) in 1975 at the age of 33. Before his appointment, he was a dignified lecturer in the Department of Political Science, University of Ibadan, where he began his teaching career. Between the NIIA appointment and when he was appointed Minister of External Affairs by the Babangida administration in 1985, Akinyemi’s public profile as a prodigious scholar and charismatic diplomat had risen to a phenomenal level. He had become an enigmatic personality quietly, but intelligently provoking and courting controversies by promoting contentious and idiosyncratic doctrines and concepts that most times ended up creating conflictual crossroads and conceptual hullabaloo.

For instance, as Minister of External Affairs, Akinyemi evoked engaging and lively discourses through his various seminal lectures, speeches, policy actions and statements. Scholars and journalists had a good feast on some of his “wild” doctrines. One of these was the ‘Kuru Doctrine’. The debates generated by this doctrine added candour, colour and flamboyance to Nigeria’s foreign policy which at that time reached its apogee. It never regained it till today. Those who condemned Akinyemi’s Kuru Doctrine and accused him of being insensitive and unfeeling to the plight of fellow African countries on the altar of reciprocity should also not ignore his interventionist role in Chad-Libyan and Mali-Burkina Faso wars as well as the introduction of the Technical Aid Corps scheme. These two initiatives and efforts meant to engender and sustain regional peace and cooperation and radically re-focus Nigeria’s instrumentality of assisting its brothers, are pointers to Akinyemi’s

supportive stance for African countries which showed courtesy to Nigeria without any tincture of vassalage.

The other was the “Concert of Medium Powers”. Attempting an epistemic diagnosis of this concept, Mohammed Haruna, a journalist with the New Nigerian Newspaper insinuated in an article he wrote on the debate in the newspaper on September 28, 1986, that the proposal for a concert of Medium Powers was hardly original. In his words: “As far back as 1975, Dr. Mahmud Tukur, a former Vice-Chancellor of Bayero University, had suggested this to a Commission on Foreign Policy headed by Professor Adebayo Adedeji of the Economic Commission for Africa. Tukur had suggested that the “Concert comprise Nigeria, Brazil, Indonesia, Iran and Saudi Arabia”. Akinyemi, who Haruna claimed did not originate the idea, is its most persistent protagonist and has expanded it to include Sweden, Austria, Australia, Argentina, India and Nigeria.

Haruna’s arguments against the “Concert” were shocking. First, he said the “concert” would not serve any useful purpose other than counter-poise to NAM which the West sees as being too aligned in favour of the East. Second, he questioned the exclusion of Cuba and Iran from the “Concert considering their regional influence. Third, he criticized the composition of the “Concert” on the assumption that they were all friends of the West except Yugoslavia which was truly non-aligned. Haruna’s contemptuous dismissal of Akinyemi’s proposal and his allusion to Mahmud Tukur as the originator of the “Concert” idea smacked of mischief and sentiments. His silence on the actual name proposed for the “Concert” by Tukur suggested that though both men were in agreement on the conceptualization of the “concert” as a bridging organisation that was meant to oscillate between the two superpowers, the puzzle of knowing the contents and context of both proposals needed to be unraveled. Notwithstanding, Akinyemi’s position for the creation of the new organization was articulated with unambiguous and unmistakable scrupulousness. Conscious of the need for a Movement that would stabilize the international system and free it from ideological contestation that was constantly discharging traction into the system, Akinyemi rebuffed the extant Non-Aligned Movement for its sententious character. In its stead, he advocated for a “Concert of Medium Powers” consisting of Sweden, Austria, Australia, Brazil, Argentina, Yugoslavia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria and Algeria. He gave his reasons: “The power of the original non-aligned movement was not military or economic, it was moral. It was the power of the uncorrupted innocents. It was a power of virtue... The superpowers have polluted their moral content and have seen through the nakedness of the Third World. What is now needed is a new vision, a new burst of creativity. Those who are needed now are statesmen presiding over economies that command attention”.

This was the thesis Haruna wanted to rubbish on the altar of ethnic glorification. Assuming, but not conceding, that Tukur’s proposed Movement was also tagged “Concert of Medium Powers”, Haruna’s failure to elaborate on Tukur’s definition or description of his own “Concert” was a serious disservice to the debate. However, beyond Haruna’s fraternal chauvinism, this writer had once questioned the inclusion of Nigeria in the “Concert”. I am more persuaded to believe that Akinyemi’s “Concert of Medium Powers” was inspired by his unshakeable faith in Nigeria’s prospect and potential for greatness. In the article, I submitted that “As the Minister of External Affairs, Akinyemi took his nationalistic emotionalism too far when he ignored all the indices for measuring capability and rating nation’s power by classifying Nigeria as one of the Medium Powers in the “Concert”. While not implying that Akinyemi was not at liberty to come up with the “Concert” idea, Middle Powers, not Medium Powers, was a more appealing and attractive universal classification. Until a concept has been empirically validated, its universal acceptability will still be in abeyance to avoid conflict of details. This is exactly the problem Akinyemi has created for himself by ignoring an essential

conceptual process and principle. Attempting to smuggle Nigeria into the Middle Powers category via a disputable concept has negated the validity of the “Concert” in terms of its composition. In her book “Middle Powers and Commercial Diplomacy”, Donna Lee, extrapolating from the work of influential writers like Wight and Riddel, defines Middle Powers as “those which by reason of their size, their material resources, their willingness and ability to accept responsibility, their influence and stability are close to being great powers” and “a power with such military strength, resources and strategic position that in peacetime the great powers bid for its support, and in wartime, while it has no hope of winning a war against a great power, it can hope to inflict costs on a great power out of proportion to what the great power can hope to gain by attacking it”.⁵ Then and now, then meaning when Akinyemi came up with his “Concert of Medium Powers” and now, meaning Nigeria of the 21st century, at no time did Nigeria fit into these two definitions. If by international ranking and standard, Britain is regarded as a “Middle Power”, pray what then qualifies Nigeria for this group despite not being a nuclear power”. However, what has created this impression is its pretensions strategic relevance as a regional power in Africa. But when did regional swaggering become a sufficient criterion for middle power qualification? It was not surprising that the whole idea went mute with Akinyemi’s departure from office.⁶

There is no doubt that Akinyemi’s concept was attractive in terms of its content but its context and details are not robust in conceptual depth. This is how he described the qualification criteria: “Their (medium powers) credentials are not some dubious sanctimonious virtue, not some claim to a higher level of reason but the fact that these countries of a combination of (a) their population (b) their economy (c) their uncommittedness, foreign policy-wise, represent countries with sufficient credibility to command the attention of the superpowers. Together, they can seek to steer the superpowers away from a collision course by offering ideas which will not be seen as being sponsored by the East or West”.⁷ I am taking this as a mere description or an expression of opinion not necessarily because there is no correlation between Akinyemi’s description and the work of classical realists like Hans Morgenthau but because of the failure of Akinyemi to draw an empirical distinction between “Medium” and “Middle”. For instance, Hans Morgenthau, a classical realist like Akinyemi, submits that, “in these circumstances the interests of middle powers are powerful constraints on great powers. In addition to this, Holbraad also agrees that “when Middle powers are at the centre of a regional association of states... they are in a position to exercise decisive influence on the state of international relations in their region”.⁸ Both the submissions of Morgenthau and Holbraad encapsulate some fraction of Akinyemi’s description of what a middle power connotes, the only deficiency in Akinyemi’s own submission was his failure to provide a conceptual interpretation for his choice of the word “Medium” instead of “Middle”.

Whether as a policy or as a concept, the Concert of Medium Powers was inadequate to pass any epistemological scrutiny. What was presented as the definition of the concept was a mere description of an opinion which lacked theoretical content or conceptual force. The onus of admissibility rests on Akinyemi to elaborate more epistemically the distinction between ‘Middle’ and “Medium” and not just leave the responsibility of conceptual clarity to those who unconsciously, find it convenient to simply assume that both terms mean the same thing. If this makes sense literally, it does not provide any theoretical conviction or any conceptual persuasion. In international relations, empirical validation is stronger than assumptive excursion.

One other Akinyemi’s policy or idea that failed was the Black (nuclear) Bomb, a project that was to consume about \$50 million. Explaining what he meant, Akinyemi said: “... it is the only thing to stop a racially one-sided large-scale annihilation of man in a moment of madness. In a piece he wrote on

Akinyemi at 80, Sylvester Monye said that “even Nigerians did not really understand what Akinyemi meant”. He went further: “Akinyemi still believes in the Black Bomb even till today just as he wants the country to send a Nigerian into space. Obviously, his Afrocentric ideas and independent-mindedness have cost him dearly; the West never saw him fit for appointments into multilateral organisations”.⁹

Monye was not the only one that came after Akinyemi and his Black Bomb bombshell. This is what the Nigerian Tribune of August 21, 1987, wrote about him and his Black Bomb idea: “Akinyemi’s position is totally unacceptable... in the first place, Prof. Akinyemi wanted a “Black Bomb” so that in case there is an outbreak of nuclear war, Black people can lump one or two of their own and die satisfied that they have inflicted casualties on other races-amazing reasoning, considering that the probability of a nuclear war is highest among the races that Prof. Akinyemi will like to have the satisfaction of seeing annihilated by a black bomb in the event of such a war of liberation...”¹⁰

Flaying the policy in very harsh words, the Nigerian Tribune blasted: “A country, which has no basic weapons industry can hardly expect to be a successful nuclear power. Nuclear weapons do not deliver themselves. The means of delivering them call for a massive industrial infrastructure, which Nigeria cannot pretend to have. If our policy makers will only remind themselves, regularly of the environment which they operate, they will save themselves the trouble of articulating ideas and programmes which are not only unrealistic, but also contemptuous of the attitude and aspiration of the generality of the people”.¹¹

Dazed by the scathing attack of his novel Black Bomb idea by the Nigerian Tribune, Akinyemi failed to offer any defence in his reaction. The opportunity to do this came during what he called: “Two Years of Foreign Policy: A Self-Assessment”. At a press briefing he organized in August 28, 1987 (seven clear days after the Nigerian Tribune Editorial) to tell the international community about his stewardship, Akinyemi only discussed the Technical Aid Corps Scheme and the Concert of Medium Powers. He said nothing about the Black Bomb in his presentation. To those criticizing TACS, Akinyemi stated: “These critics forget or are unaware that the judicious exercise of a nation’s diplomacy is part and parcel of the process of economic recovery. For how can Nigeria promote its exports, attract foreign investments, re-schedule its debts and diversify his trading partners, among other requirements of our economic restructuring programme, without the effective exercise of foreign diplomacy”. I agree with Akinyemi and I want to submit with very strong persuasion and assertiveness that the Scheme is the most brilliant and enterprising policy ever conceived by any academic or anyone that has ever held the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs in this country. This view is reinforced by the fact that TACS is still one of the critical components of Nigeria’s foreign policy till today.

In a nation where policies suffer summersaults and serial abandonments as a result of politics, invidious competitions, successor-predecessor rivalries, for TACS to have survived eight administrations with a life span of 37 years attests to Akinyemi’s perspicacity in foreign policy. Nigeria is not a co-ordinated nation when it comes to policy legacies. I also want to submit that TACS is not sustained on government benevolence, but on the quality of its sanguine character which both the beneficiary countries and their benefactors (Nigeria) have come to accept as an enduring heritage and bond of unity among African countries. Despite the frightening perception that other countries have about Nigerians, there has not been any recorded incident of rejection by any of the beneficiary nations because the federal Government has consistently ensured that those sent abroad are worthy ambassadors of the country and not those who have the tendency to rubbish the objectives of the Scheme.

Admitted that Nigeria’s economy at this critical point of the country’s existence, is incapable of supporting alms-giving foreign policy, what is unquestionable is the fact that Nigeria cannot stop its Big Brother’s role even in the face of its dwindling fortunes. TACS remains the only foreign policy instrumentality that the country can use to boost its image and leverage on when it comes to positioning its citizens in strategic international organisations. The absence of Nigeria and Nigerians in some of these international organisations may lead to diplomatic atrophy for Nigeria. As it stands, TACS is one of the very few effective foreign policy instruments that still make Nigeria relevant in international relations and international politics. Should Nigeria decline further in international relevance, there will be nothing noble that its citizens can be proud of. This will be a pathetic narrative of a nation that was once a force to reckon with in global politics and that was once touted as Giant of Africa.

Conclusion

One quality that transfixes me about Bolaji Akinyemi is his public life Puritanism. At a time that writers like Richard Sennet (author of *The Fall of the Public Man*) and others are evaluating the “imbalance between private and public experience, and the decline of involvement in political life in recent decades”, Akinyemi brushed aside such apprehension by staking his integrity for the service of his country and humanity.¹²

There is no doubt that Bolaji Akinyemi’s contributions to Nigeria’s foreign policy and scholarship are imperishable. His ideas are saliently legendary; his visions are full of uncommon orthodoxy; his understanding of power politics is transcendental. His methodology to issues in contemporary international relations is radically conservative. His teaching and treatment of international politics is epistemological. His lore is squeezed in the intellection of his personality.

His works manifest the energy of a gerontocratic prodigy who has an inclination for details and facts. His seminal endowments are devoid of any impressionism as he is gifted with the oratorical capacity to deliver products of his nuclear intelligence in a manner that will make you marvel at his diligence. In a saner clime where brilliance is recognised and appreciated, a personality like Bolaji Akinyemi will be celebrated as an icon of invaluable resourcefulness.

Bolaji Akinyemi’s radicalism, generosity, religiousity, humility, erudition, intransigence, piety, punctuality, egotism, and popularity are special attributes that epitomize a scholar who is an ‘interlectual’, intellectual and a genius of intriguing humanity and existential realism.¹³

In the words of Monye: “Akinyemi is not tired of pushing the frontiers of knowledge in foreign policy issues. At the last count, his weekly Foreign Policy Clinic on Thursdays - “Thru My Eyes with Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi” has recorded more than over 100 sessions on YouTube. When I listened to him in one of the sessions analyse the withdrawal of US armed forces from Afghanistan, I was overwhelmed by the depth of his knowledge of Foreign Policy.¹⁴

Notes

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