

# A restless Journey

From his early days at LSE, **Omotade “Tade” Aina** knew he was never destined to be a cloistered scholar.

I came to LSE in 1976 as a young MSc student in Sociology. It was a time of great transitions both in ideas and personnel, but transitions which were anchored in cherished traditions. It was the LSE of robust debates across and within ideologies: a place where ideas endlessly flowed, where you were confronted with opposing ideas and yet where conversations were carried out with a high degree of tolerance.

There was no orthodoxy that was not challenged. In the lecture halls and corridors, knowledge and ideas were palpable. These were the times when the major paradigms in the social sciences were in crisis and transition and we often boasted then that we encountered in our corridors, seminar rooms,

restaurants and bars what would become public bestsellers many years later.

This was the LSE of Lord Dahrendorf, Amartya Sen and Ernest Gellner. Ralph Milliband had left just three years before but his works resonated in seminars and our readings. These were intellectual giants who had impressive biographies of scholarship, political and public service engagement and activism.

The LSE of my time combined rigour with a large dose of intellectual and political scepticism, along with passion and compassion. There were many international students – about half the student population – among whom were many African students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, and we often met every lunch hour in the Students’ Union restaurant, where we formed what was then called the “Black Belt”, made up of predominantly African students but also African-American and Caribbean. We even had other Africans who were not LSE students joining us. Our conversations were always about politics, social justice and of course the struggles against poverty and underdevelopment on the African continent. In an age of military dictatorship, we talked and debated democracy a lot. We also disagreed a lot.

One important characteristic of most of the African students then was the fact that we were all clear we were returning to our countries after our education.

I returned to Nigeria and to the academy. I had been on study leave from the University of Lagos. I also knew the kind of scholar I wanted to be: one who used his knowledge for social change and social justice. At LSE I learned that I must

continuously sharpen my theoretical and reasoning skills, as well as my ability to deploy the necessary and appropriate evidence available through rigorous and world-class research. I also found reinforcement and fertile grounds for my passion and compassion in the history of the School, its founders and the Fabian tradition, and in the inspiration of scholars like Lord Dahrendorf and Amartya Sen.

I knew I would never be a cloistered scholar. Knowledge had to be with mission and purpose but neither as orthodoxy nor fundamentalism. It was knowledge for the advancement of the collective well-being of Nigerians, Africans and the poor and underserved wherever they may be. This was why my life pathway from LSE through the completion of my PhD was a restless journey that took me to the University of Sussex and back to the University of Lagos as a lecturer, where I not only taught but was active in not-for-profits such as the Lagos Group for the Study of Human Settlements, where we pioneered work on low-income settlements such as Makoko and Olaleye-Iponri.

Our work with the urban poor included rejecting notions that degraded and criminalised them. We studied culture, economy, land tenure and health. While still at Lagos, I helped to co-found, with other colleagues across Nigeria, the Nigerian Environmental Action and Study Team (NEST). We pioneered the call for attention to Nigeria’s threatened environment and the challenge of sustainable development in Nigeria.

From Lagos, I joined the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), a pan-African mission-driven organisation in Dakar, Senegal. CODESRIA has been at the forefront of the intellectual struggles for democracy, social justice and equitable development in Africa. My later experiences in grant-making in philanthropic foundations at the Ford Foundation for ten years, and more recently at the Carnegie Corporation of New York, were all part of the pathway from my days at the School.

I have recently joined the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR) training and research not-for-profit working on governance and public policy research, training and advocacy in Nairobi, Kenya. All of these are about making knowledge work for social justice, change and reduction of poverty. They are seeds that were sown and nurtured at LSE. ■



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