

Claude Ake (February 18, 1939-November 7, 1996)

Claude Ake, Africa's foremost political economist and social scientist dedicated his intellectual work and life to the social emancipation and empowerment of African people, by theorizing an African social science paradigm which emphasized the primacy of African thinking for democracy and development in the continent. Educated at the Universities of Ibadan, London, and Columbia, Claude earned a PhD in Political Science in 1966, taught briefly at Columbia University, United States, and Carleton University, Canada, before returning to Africa. In Africa he taught at Nairobi University and the University of Dar es Salaam, before returning to Nigeria in the mid-1970s, as a Professor of Political Economy, and later Dean of the Faculty of Social Science, University of Post Harcourt, Nigeria. He held visiting research fellowships at Oxford, Cambridge and the Brookings Institution. He was also a Visiting Professor at Yale University.

Ake combined the finest traditions of radical, humanist and progressive scholarship with a social commitment to change. The impact of his immense contributions towards a relevant and multi-disciplinary African Social Science—particularly at the formative stages of several independent Pan African Social Science organizations such as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research (CODESRIA), and Association of African Political Science (AAPS)—is widely acknowledged within the scholarly community in Africa and beyond.

He was also a prolific writer and socially-engaged scholar. Of the many books he authored, several were instrumental in challenging mainstream social science theoretical perspectives and provoking a paradigm-shift in African political economy and social science, influencing several generations of scholars. Such books included: *Revolutionary Pressures in Africa* (1978); *Social Science as Imperialism: A Theory of Political Development* (1979); *Democratization of Disempowerment in Africa* (1994); and *Democracy and Development in Africa* (1996) and *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa* (published posthumously in 2000). Apart from these he published journal articles, and gave lectures in prominent universities and leading institutes across the world.

Ake's scholarship did not end with being radical, pan-Africanist and anti-imperialist, but also involved critiquing African dictatorships, including the military regimes in Nigeria. Using his platform as president of the Nigerian Political Science Association (1980-1982), Claude Ake commented on the contradictions underpinning the military-authored political transition programme and the second Nigerian 'democratic' republic, which he predicted turned out to be short-lived after being brought to an abrupt end by a military coup in 1984. An activist-scholar, Ake joined other progressives to form a political association to mobilize for positive change in Nigeria. He quit the arena of partisan politics when the military regime refused to register autonomous and independent political associations as political parties, but imposed two government-created political parties on Nigerians.

Ake established the Centre for Advanced Social Science (CASS) in 1991 to create an autonomous space for independent social science research and foster social engagement and development. The following year, he received a National Merit Award from the federal government of Nigeria in recognition of his contributions to society. However, Ake continued in his advocacy for democracy and development, and in 1995, he resigned in protest from the Shell-sponsored Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES), condemning the company for its complicity in the hanging of Ogoni

environmental and minority rights activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa on the orders of the military ruling council in 1995.

The following year Ake died in an unfortunate air crash on the outskirts of Lagos on his way to honour an international speaking commitment. A fitting tribute published in the *Journal of Democracy* 8:1, (1997), pp. 187-188; aptly sums up the contributions of this distinguished African scholar, thus, “An original thinker, a prolific writer, and a man of uncompromising integrity, Ake was at the center of the fight for democracy, human rights and social justice in Nigeria and throughout Africa... ..Ake was throughout his life a searing critic of authoritarianism, political violence and repression, and corruption. He also challenged the superficial nature of many electoral regimes in Africa”.

Written by Cyril Obi, with Ukoha Ukiwo