

## OBITUARY: PROF. PETER PALMER EKEH, 1937-2020



Prof. Peter Palmer Ekeh

Where does one begin to talk about Professor Peter Palmer Ekeh, the academic giant who took on social science theorizing from the prism of the ‘ordinary’ reality that is well known but not reckoned with? Is it from his paradigmatic “Two Public’s in Africa” which was originally written as a graduate seminar paper at UC Berkeley? Or his PhD thesis on the Sociological Examination of Dreams, which extended the frontiers of the critical study of esoteric life and living beyond the narrow psychoanalytical frames of Sigmund Freud? Or his engagement with the two traditions of social exchange theory? Or his teaching skills which simplified the most difficult subjects for sustained and lifelong understanding and interest? Or his cultural rootedness that

shaped the last years of his scholarly journey? Or, the critical part of his cultural and historical engagements that related to Benin, whose social formations and civilizations he ranked at the level of ancient Greek civilization, as in “Benin and Thebes: Elementary Forms of Civilization”, and his famous debate with Isidore Okpewho, another iconic scholar of literature on Benin-Urhobo relations dating back to the Agbogbidi era? Or, finally, his works on colonialism as an epoch rather than episode that redefined the study of the subject and strengthened the theoretical pillars of decolonization in unparalleled ways?

In all of these and many more (for example the historical and sociological foundations of statehood in Africa, or citizenship and the pathologies of public finance, or slavery and the reconstruction of tribalism)

Ekeh was consistent in his thorough knowledge, elegant language and communication, and most of all, his originality. Ekeh lived a very humble life, and was not given to showboating displays of his mastery. He did not have to be vulgar or combative in disagreement, as evidenced by his exchanges with Bala Usman, and his engagements with power and injustice in Nigeria and Africa. He was a gentle radical and activist, who led the Nigerian Scholars for Dialogue to provide intellectual leadership for the democratization struggles of the 1990s, and founded the Urhobo Historical project as a repository of knowledge in nationalist social movements. As a teacher, Ekeh was father, mentor, inspirer and motivator. He was one of the pioneer students of Sociology at Ibadan where he cut his teeth under Ulf Himmelstrand, PC Lyod, and many others. By the time he completed his doctoral degree at Berkeley in 1970, he had become not just a social theorist, but a social scientist of the highest acclaim. Ekeh built generations of scholars at Ibadan where he was between 1975 and the early 1990s, and SUNY Buffalo, from where he retired. I am a proud protege of Ekeh, a son who found fulfillment in his discipleship, and a carrier of the original Ekeh that has defined my academic horizon. Ever smiling, warm, tolerant, and understanding, they don't come many as Ekeh. Adieu, great one, adieu.

*By Prof. Eghosa E. Osaghae, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria*