

Sooner Nation

Internationally acclaimed economist and educator Benjamin Ola. Akande

For someone who has lived, worked and taught around the globe, it may seem surprising that there is a singular, unmatched experience that remains to this day one of the most remarkable in his life: when the Sooner faithful converge in Norman to cheer on the University of Oklahoma football team.

Yet for Benjamin Ola. Akande, the distinguished Nigerian-born American economist who has enjoyed a stellar and wide-ranging career in academics and business on the international stage, it is true. The pageantry and camaraderie of a home game football Saturday is a time for unity unlike anything else he has encountered. That is saying something.

"It is a special time where, regardless of what school or college you belong, or where you come from, we all are wearing crimson and celebrating something that binds us together in a purposeful way," he says. "At OU, it was this sporting event on Saturdays that brings the Sooner Nation together, this celebration of sports. I have been around the world and there is nothing quite like it."

That said, it took a while for the then-graduate student to come to this conclusion. Akande recalls his first semester on campus in 1984. As he made his way to Bizzell Memorial Library, books in tow, he literally was swimming against the tide, one of few students headed in that direction.

"On my way to the library I would meet groups of people that were not going to Bizzell, but rather to the football

game," he remembers. "I am wondering, 'What the heck is going on over there? What is the celebration?' I did not get it."

He could hear the cheering from the Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium inside the library because, he chuckles, there were "maybe five of us." Before long, he changed his Saturday study habits.

"Initially, I did not understand that part of the experience of being at the University of Oklahoma is Saturdays on Owen Field," Akande says. "So, I came to realize that it was a good thing to be involved in this celebration of sports on Saturdays."

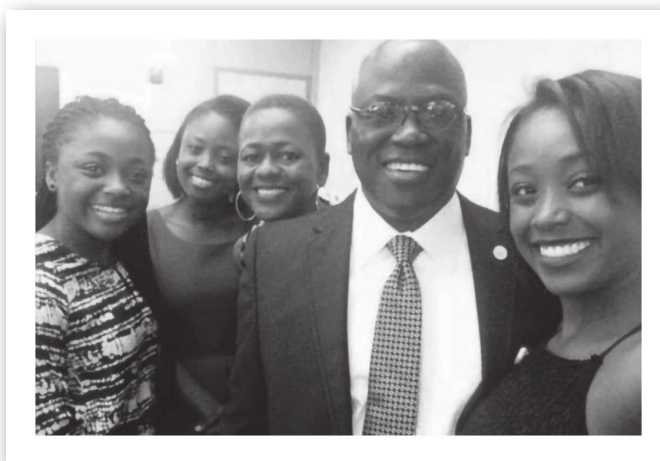
Born in the most populated country in Africa, Akande came to the United States in 1979 to attend Wayland Baptist University in Plainview, Texas. His father studied at the West Texas school in the late '50s and early '60s. He regaled Akande and his sisters with tales about his time learning in America.

"As my siblings and I grew up in Nigeria, we heard stories about this wonderful place called America," Akande says. "My parents told us if we made good grades and stayed out of trouble, one day we would get a chance to go there, too."

After earning a bachelor's degree in business administration from Wayland, where Akande

later returned to serve as chief academic officer and chair of the Division of Business Administration, it was time to think about graduate school.

"My older sister, Nickie, was already studying biochemistry at OU and I would visit her and that is how I was first introduced to OU," he recalls. "When it came time for me to go to



The Akande family takes a selfie. From left: Reni, Anjola, Bola, Benjamin and Moyosola.

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN





Benjamin Akande and his wife, Bola Taiwo-Akande, left, join daughter Reni Akande at a family member's birthday celebration in traditional African attire.

graduate school, I thought I would go somewhere I was comfortable and OU fit that requirement.”

Other family members must have thought so, too. After Nickie graduated with her master’s in chemistry and biochemistry, Akande’s sister Yemi earned her bachelor’s in journalism and mass communication, then a master’s in human relations and a Ph.D. in communication, while sister Bola earned her master’s in public administration.

Like his siblings, Akande found the OU campus an expansive, but friendly place where he earned two master’s degrees, one in public administration and the other in economics, along with a doctorate in economics. The plan, Akande says, was to return to Nigeria and pursue his interest in public policy. He was actively publishing, offering alternative economic options to his home country, which, at the time, was run by military strongmen.

“That was a remarkable opportunity to offer insight and economic perspective on what was going on back home,” he says. “I was in an academic environment that allowed these kinds of ideas to flourish.”

However, Akande was challenging the status quo in Nigeria and his ideas did not go over very well with those in power. He chuckles and explains that

he had a change of career plans when he dared to challenge the military government. Increasingly, Akande realized that returning to Nigeria would be unsafe. So, he stayed in the United States in self-imposed exile.

“I would be taking a big risk if I went home to work, so I decided to pursue a career in academics,” he says. “I served as a consultant to the World Bank focusing on economic development primarily in the West African region and was also a consultant to the United Nations Development Program.”

After finishing his doctorate at OU in 1995 and spending five years at Wayland as the head of the business department, Akande was appointed in 2000 as dean and professor of economics in the George Herbert Walker School of Business and Technology at Webster University, a tier-one private institution located in St. Louis with graduate campuses across the United States, Europe, Asia and Africa. During

his 15-year tenure at Webster, he successfully led the largest academic unit at the institution, introduced new academic programs that attracted traditional and non-traditional students, and developed Webster’s first corporate partnership program.

Today, Akande serves as assistant vice chancellor for International Affairs–Africa and associate director of Washington University’s Global Health Center. As vice chancellor, Akande leads the interdisciplinary initiative that supports faculty and student research on the continent of

Africa, helps establish institutional relationships between the university and collaborative partners in Africa, and is committed to expanding learning and teaching opportunities for faculty, staff and students. Akande oversees programs and initiatives in more than 36 countries in Africa focusing on research, education and innovation.

“Africa is going to be far more important in this century, growing dramatically in population and economic strength, and we have to be in position as a university to prepare our students for the challenge,” said Chancellor Mark S. Wrighton at the time of Akande’s appointment. “We also need to provide opportunities for our

faculty to increase their knowledge of and involvement in these issues. Dr. Akande will be tasked with helping us prepare a strategic plan that will enhance the impact and programmatic activities with which Washington University is already engaged and look to building new ones.”

For his part, Akande sees this newest chapter as a prime opportunity to have an impact on where he is from—from where he is now. He wants students and faculty to appreciate his homeland as a destination that is prime for intellectual growth, and human and economic development.

“According to the World Bank, six of the 10 fastest growing economies in the world are in Africa,” he says. “Africa is a place for human development, for education, research collaboration and breakthrough. Africa offers the ultimate opportunity in academia to help solve some of the biggest challenges facing people today: malnutrition, poverty, dis-

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ease. This is the place where you can make a big impact and we want to lead the way at Washington University.”

Prior to his arrival, Akande spent two years as president of Westminster College, a 167-year-old small liberal arts college in Fulton, Mo. During his tenure, Akande raised \$15 million in private giving and increased alumni participation from 8 percent to 18 percent. More than \$4.3 million was raised for the endowment, and two professorships were established with this fund. He also developed a corporate partnership program and worked to develop a brand and awareness to increase enrollment at the school.

“It was an honor for me to serve as the first African-American president of Westminster College,” he says. “The changes we set in motion will have a long-term, positive impact on the college. My tenure at Westminster gave me a glimpse of the opportunities and challenges inherent in higher education today and ways of confronting them.”

From that vantage point, Akande views competition, not cost, as the biggest challenge to higher education today and says that institutions are investing a lot of energy and money competing for the same students.

“Opportunities abound for institutions of higher learning to proactively re-invest themselves in this intense and competitive environment,” he says. “They must find real and strategic value in building partnerships and alliances within and outside the institution. The future of higher education belongs to those institutions that are successful in strengthening their capacity to diversify their revenue base, to free up resources to bolster successful programs and create new programs.”

Akande believes OU has done an excellent job of promoting the totality of the college experience, one that lasts well beyond a student’s time on campus, as it has for him.

“At OU you get a remarkable education, along with a sense of belonging,” he says.

With his academic appointments, speaking engagements, corporate board service, corporate consulting, television appearances, sought-after commentary and international publications, Akande sees himself first and foremost as a teacher. He harkens back to his days at Adams Hall—now the Price College of Business—and his time with Alex Kondonassis, the retired David Ross Boyd Professor and OU Department of Economics chair who taught at OU for more than 50 years.

“It was in the economic development class at OU with Dr. K, as we called him, where he taught us what it takes for nations to develop and the challenges therein,” Akande recalls. “Dr. K taught me that as difference makers, we should not be afraid to challenge the status quo. In those classes

at Oklahoma, in Adams Hall, was where I got that first inkling of this world view.”

Akande says he loves hearing from his former students and finds it meaningful that they stay in touch with him.

Diana Butler remembers Akande as the professor who could distill complex theories for the layperson to understand. As a health care consultant in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex, Butler continues to use what she learned in Akande’s classroom.


“He was one of the most influential professors at OU and impacted the trajectory for my career,” she says. “Ben’s love of teaching made economic theories relevant to our world. He made such an impression on me. He taught me how to communicate complexities to people that help me in my day-to-day life. What I appreciated about him as a teacher is that if you did not understand, he stayed with you until you did.”

Butler has kept up with Akande and his multifaceted career as an academic and international thought leader. She is inspired as she observes him flourish and at his ability to move in and out of different countries with ease, maintaining positive messages about solving difficult problems.

Norman resident and businessman Jerry Isbell describes Akande as an absolute rock star. As his student in the 1980s, Isbell says his professor and now longtime friend of 30 years is one of the most dynamic, charismatic and influential teachers he had while an OU student.

“Ben made economics fun,” Isbell says. “He took the boring out of it and helped us understand concepts in a real-world sense. He gave us theory but conceptualized it. He was a very demanding teacher and taught you to prepare at a higher level. I would say he definitely helped me in my career and broadened my horizons. He will do anything for you.”

Akande maintains his connection to Oklahoma via a vibrant Sooner alumni community in St. Louis. He enjoys the diversity he finds in the heartland and while he often travels to Africa—his parents are in their late 80s and 90s—he credits his time at OU for the foundation of his life today. Whether he is offering commentary on National Public Radio, consulting with multinational companies, or leading a public forum, Akande sees it all as teaching.

“Oklahoma instilled this understanding and appreciation in me for the profession of teaching,” he says. “It allows you to make an impact on multiple generations.” 

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