

## A Decolonial Intent. Lalage Bown and the Emergence of an African Voice

Budd L. Hall, Michael Omolewa

**Abstract:**

Our chapter provides evidence of Lalage's decolonial intent through two narratives linked to two conferences. First is the story of her work as Secretary for the two sessions of the International Congress of Africanists actually held in Africa. The second is a close-up look of Lalage's vision of what a truly transformative African approach to education for liberation looked like. Michael Omolewa, with his historical touch, has drawn on documents from Lalage's papers in the Oxford University archives and elsewhere. The second story comes from Budd Hall's personal experience working with Lalage on the organising of the 1971 meeting of the African Association of Adult Education in Dar es Salaam. Taken together these stories provide insights into Lalage's commitment to providing space for African intellectuals and political leaders to rise from the colonial constraints of the day as well as to her ideas about the practical work needed to break colonial chains politically and institutionally. We close with a poem, a tribute to Lalage written by Budd on the occasion of her 90th birthday.

**Keywords:** African Studies; Decolonisation; Nigeria; Nyerere

### Introduction

In 1949, at the age of 22, Lalage Bown travelled to Ghana to take up a position as a resident tutor in the newly established Extra-Mural Department of the also newly established University of Ghana. The story that Lalage was fond to share about her interview for the position in Ghana, an unusual appointment for a young woman, concerns the older Oxford scholar. He asked her, «What would happen to you if your car were to break down and you were stuck in the middle of the bush. Wouldn't you panic?» «Well», she said, «If you don't give me the job you will never find out».

The UK Foreign Office supported the establishment of adult education structures in the colonies as a way to provide educational opportunities for so many of those who had never had a chance to attend the very few secondary schools

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in those nations. Their vision was to provide post Second World War African leaders with English style educational backgrounds in preparation for Independence at some much further point in time. The colonial office idea of what constituted a proper education for eventual governance was decidedly colonial in nature. African leaders should have access to the best political and social knowledge, knowledge grounded in the Eurocentric classics on democracy and society. There was an assumption that the classical education of universities such as Oxford or Cambridge was superior and necessary. In fact, there was an assumption that African intellectual history did not contain the depth and breadth of sophistication needed for modern political life. It is the contention of these authors that the young Lalage Bown, perhaps influenced by her former Tutor, the Marxist historian Thomas Hodgkin, saw beyond the Eurocentric canon of the day and found ways to support a decidedly decolonial intellectual project. Her work both within the structures of Extra-Mural studies departments in the several universities and countries where she worked and within a broader intellectual world of an emerging African Studies had as a goal increased visibility for African thinkers of the past and of her times. While non-African by birth, she recognized the limitations of the colonial educational provision and the challenge of pulling back the curtains to reveal an Afrocentric history, politics, culture, fashion and language.

Our chapter provides evidence of Lalage's decolonial intent through two narratives linked to two conferences. First is the story of her work as Secretary for the first African studies conference to actually be held in Africa. The second is a close-up look of Lalage's vision of what a truly transformative African approach to education for liberation looked like. Michael Omolewa, with his historical touch, has drawn on documents from Lalage's papers in the Oxford University archives and records of the International Congress of Africanists at the Ajayi, J.F. Ade archives at Ibadan, Nigeria, and elsewhere. The second story comes from Budd Hall's personal experience working with Lalage on the organising of the 1971 meeting of the African Association of Adult Education in Dar es Salaam. Taken together these stories provide insights into Lalage's commitment to providing space for African intellectuals and political leaders to rise from the colonial constraints of the day as well as to her ideas about the practical work needed to break colonial chains politically and institutionally. We close with a poem, a tribute to Lalage written by Budd on the occasion of her 90th birthday.

### 1. Lalage and the International Congress of Africanists

Lalage's concept and view of Extra-Mural studies and the broad field of Adult Education moved her beyond the classroom. She was thus an unrepentant extension worker, carrying her mission beyond the walls of the University to the wider community, filling all available space with continuing learning. She was an activist throughout her life. Her initial dedication to the promotion of Africa, its people, values, and culture was sustained throughout her life.

While in Africa she joined the team of non-Africans who shared her faith in the integrity of the people of Africa and were described as Africanists. It should be remembered that this was the period when colonial rule justified the domination of Africa by the error of the assumption that Africa had little or nothing at all to offer to the world.

Some European writers, such as Basil Davidson, had tried to dismiss the myth of the stagnation of Africa and the absence of development and innovation in the publication of *Old Africa Rediscovered* (1959) which explored the past of the rich civilisation of Africa. Michael Crowder, another English man, had lamented his earlier tolerance of the myth of the inferiority of the African and had later chosen to work on aspects of the rich History of Africa. Crowder worked with African historians including Jacob Ajayi, one of the foremost historians of Africa, President of the Historical Society of Nigeria, and a past Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lagos (Omolewa and Osuntokun 2014). Ajayi and Crowder became joint editors of the Africa Atlas and the History of West Africa, both published by Longman in the UK. Crowder became a lifelong friend of Lalage. Other Africanists included Professor P.D. Curtin of the United States, Professor J. Devise of France, Professor J.D. Fage of the United Kingdom, Professor J. Vansina of Belgium and Dr I. Hrbek of Czechoslovakia.

African scholars accepted these non-African academics as partners in the task of projecting African studies. A leading African scholar, Kenneth Dike, once observed that «an Africanist must not necessarily be an African [...] Many Europeans, American and Asian scholars have contributed to the development of African studies» (Oxford Bodleian MSS.Afr.s.1877, Box 53, File 3).

In the meantime, the idea of the International Congress of Africanists came up in Moscow during the 25th meeting of the International Congress of Orientalists in August 1961. The Africa reports explained that until that year, those interested in African studies only used the opportunity presented by the International Congress of Orientalists to organise a side meeting named the Africa Section. It was thus at Moscow that it was resolved that, in view of the growing importance of African studies, it was desirable to establish a separate Congress of Africanists. Dike, who was at the time well-known both as principal of University College, Ibadan (later the University of Ibadan) as patriarch of African historiography, and author of the pioneering historical work, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta*, was nominated chairman of the Congress in absentia. Dike was to lead the Congress for the early years (Ajayi 1984-85, 1-3).

The objects of the Congress were listed as:

To develop international cooperation in the field of African studies through the organisation of periodic sessions, study-groups, scholarly publications, and the exchange of information between Africanists; and to provide thereby a forum for the exposition and discussion of concepts and theories of significance for African research,

To organise and co-ordinate research in African studies on an international basis,

To develop cooperation with other organisations pursuing similar scholarly objectives, and

To serve as a body which shall encourage Africans to have an ever-growing consciousness of their membership of the common race and to express themselves in all fields of human endeavour (Oxford Bodleian MSS.Afr.s.1877, Box 53, File 2).

Lalage Bown, assistant director of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Ibadan was appointed Secretary of the organising committee while the Principal of the College, Kenneth Dike, served as Chairman. From her position, Lalage facilitated the meeting of the committee which was held in September 1961 at the University College Ibadan. The committee decided that the International Congress would hold for one week and that the venue future sessions of the Congress would alternate between the English-speaking and French-speaking countries.

To ensure that the Congress reflected the international character of scholars in African Studies, membership included Heads of university institutions in Senegal, Ethiopia, Congo-Leopoldville, and Ghana, together with a representative from the National Education Secretariat of Tunisia, were chosen from within Africa itself; representatives of the International African Institute, the Africa Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Société Africaine de Culture, and the US African Studies Association were invited to participate. Other distinguished scholars in African studies who were also invited included Alioune Diop, Kenneth Onwuka Dike, Daryll Forde, Michael Crowder, J. Ki-Zerbo, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Ulli Beier, S.O. Biobaku, J.F. Ade Ajayi, Philip Curtin, Bethwell Ogot, and Basil Davidson, all of «who had contributed to the promotion of the knowledge on many aspects related to Africa» (Oxford Bodleian Library MSS. Afr.s.1877, Box 52, File 1a).

The first International Congress of Africanists was held at the University of Ghana from 11 to 18 December 1961. Dike gave some details of the expectations from the Inaugural Congress:

[...] we hope for a Congress in which African Africanists for the first time can take the lead and make the decisions; and a Congress which can coordinate all the work being done in Africa at the moment. We envisage it as having the practical purpose of avoiding unnecessary duplication of effort and allowing continuing contact between all Africanists, whether African, European, American, or Asiatic. We hope that scholars from all over the world will attend the Congress with sympathy and understanding for our desire to provide a forum for African interpretations of African affairs and to some extent a nursery for aspiring African scholars (The Africa-America Institute 1963).

It was reported that Dike was by no means disappointed by the outcomes of the Congress. As the Africa Report observed:

The Congress, which many feared would be second-rate, or dominated by politics, proved a success – partly because it produced a sensible constitution

that will ensure its continuation, partly because it gathered a distinguished and stimulating group of scholars together in such pleasant surroundings as the University of Ghana, partly because of the interest of many of the papers that were presented, but above all, because it represented a sort of declaration of cultural independence of Africa by Africans (The Africa-America Institute 1963).

The Second International Congress of Africanists was held from 11 to 20 December 1967 at the University of Dakar, Senegal. Lalage, who was then in Zambia, served as Joint Executive Secretary of the International Congress of Africanists with her friend Michael Crowder, British Africanist. The theme of the Congress was Research in the Service of Africa and was made to address a topical subject of great relevance to Africa (Ajayi, J.F. Ade Archives, Ibadan, Box 56).

The congress brought together Africanists, specialists in African studies from Algeria, German Democratic Republic, German Federal Republic, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cameroun, Canada, Chad, Congo Brazzaville, Congo Democratic Republic, Ivory Coast, Dahomey (now Benin), Denmark, Spain, Ethiopia, France, Gabon, The Gambia, Ghana, Great Britain, Guinea, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), Hungary, India, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Madagascar, Mali, Morocco, Mauritania, Mongolia, Niger, Nigeria, The Netherlands, Poland, United African Republic, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Switzerland, Sudan, Sweden, Tanzania, Trinidad, Tunisia, Uganda, United States of America, Yugoslavia, Zambia, UNESCO, the Vatican (Ajayi, J.F. Ade Archives, Ibadan, Box 56).

Among the participants was Robert Gardiner, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa, (ECA) and founding Director of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University College, Ibadan, who presented a paper on Research for Economic and Social development in Africa (Oxford Bodleian MSS.Afr.s.1877, Box 52, File 2a).

A major outcome of the Congress was the proposed publication of the *Encyclopedia Africana* "The Goal: A Scientific and authentically African Compendium of the Known Facts Concerning African Life, History and Culture" (Secretariat for an *Encyclopedia Africana* 1962) with its secretariat in Accra. A Director, Dr W.E.B. Du Bois, was appointed to oversee some aspects of the recommended activities emerging from the Congress.

Lalage invested her experience and expertise as Secretary of conferences and congresses in the meetings of the Africanists. The work of the Congress Secretariat was commended for the «Effective and efficient management of the Congress and provision of quality Report and proceedings of the Conference» (Oxford Bodleian MSS.Afr.s.1877, Box 53, File 3).

The holding of the Congress of Africanists had very important effects on the development of African studies. Indeed, it must be pointed out that these Africanists, African and non-African, constituted the pillar on which the subsequent History of Africa project of UNESCO stood. For example, working with notable historians and pioneers of the new Historiography of Africa, such as Jacob Ajayi, the Africanists contributed immensely to the General History of Africa project.

The 16th session of the General Conference of UNESCO in 1964 instructed the Director-General of UNESCO to undertake the drafting of a General History of Africa in response to the request of the newly Independent States of Africa to «reclaim their cultural identity, to rectify widespread ignorance about their Continent's history, and to break free of discriminatory prejudices»<sup>1</sup>. Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, Director-General of UNESCO justified the General History of Africa project, rejecting «all kinds of myths and prejudices [which] concealed the true history of Africa from the world at large» (UNESCO 1980-93, vol. 3, xvii).

The Executive Board of UNESCO thereafter established an International Scientific Committee for the drafting of a General History of Africa, made up of Africanists. The product of this initiative was the eight volumes of the *General History of Africa*. Professor Bethwell Ogot of Kenya, President of the International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of the General History of Africa, drew attention to the significance of the work for Africa and for the world:

At a time when the peoples of Africa are striving towards unity and greater cooperation in shaping their individual destinies, a proper understanding of Africa's past, with an awareness of common ties among Africans and between Africa and other continents, should not only be a major contribution towards mutual understanding among the people of the earth, but also a source of knowledge of a cultural heritage that belongs to all mankind (UNESCO 1980-93, vol. 4, xxv).

Lalage's contribution was evident in the work of Africanists. She was an extraordinary woman who threw her full weight to the promotion of African studies. Her contribution, material, psychological and emotional to the inauguration and promotion of the International Congress of Africanists was a major legacy in global partnership building that she left behind.

## 2. Pedagogies of Power: The African Association of Adult Education Conference in Tanzania, 1971

Within the field of Adult Education, Lalage's contribution to building a decolonial field of practice and scholarship expressed itself through her commitment to building Pan-African linkages through the African Association for Adult Education. Her early start in Ghana's Extra-Mural Studies unit led eventually to providing her with opportunities to further build adult education at the Universities of Ibadan, Lagos, Zambia, and Makerere in Uganda. She knew that building linkages amongst the African adult education leaders and supporters was a key to the larger decolonial project. She took on the role of Secretary of the African Association for Adult Education as a practical way to bring national figures in Adult Education across the continent. She was attracted to the vision of the late Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere who not only was the Independence leader

<sup>1</sup> <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General\\_History\\_of\\_Africa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_History_of_Africa)> (2023-07-01).

for his country, but was also a deep believer in the importance of educating the adults in his country who were already in positions of influence and were ready to act to create a new Tanzania.

1970 was officially declared Adult Education Year in Tanzania by the late Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere, the President at the time. Because of this attention to adult education, it was decided that the African Association for Adult Education, would meet in Dar es Salaam in 1971. Budd's director, the late Paul J. Mhaiki, assigned him to lead the organizing of the event from the Institute for Adult Education side. It was at that point that he contacted Lalage once more to see how he could help. All of their communications were done by post. No phone calls, no faxes, no WhatsApp. She helped design a call for papers, sent out all the invitations to perhaps 150 persons in various parts of mostly former British colonial Africa and Budd made arrangements for meeting rooms, special guests and began working on the programme. At the time Budd was in his 20s and had never organized a conference of any kind. He produced a programme as best as he could and waited until she arrived. Lalage arrived in Dar es Salaam five days before the others. She took a look at the programme notes, his agenda material and asked for a manual typewriter to be bought to a room on campus. What he remembers is that she sat at that manual typewriter and totally reworked all of the documents that he had tried to prepare. She never criticized him. She never asked for others to do the work. She created an elegant programme and a full set of reports and minutes in those few days of near flawless manual typing allowing the Dar es Salaam Institute to use the Gestetner machine to reproduce documents for the conference. What Budd learned from that early experience is that Lalage was not merely an intellect of legendary proportions, but was someone who had real world skills and an ability to work hard to support the people and the institutions which she believed in.

The Lalage that Budd met in 1971 was thrilled with the message of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere from two perspectives. She was delighted that he had shown such a powerful belief in the power of adult education to support the emergence of a new Tanzanian decolonized nation. She believed as did Nyerere that we cannot wait for our children to finish school, we need for our adults to learn now to take decisions to make lives better. She also believed in Nyerere's vision of socialism, of what he called *Ujamaa*, what some would call African socialism. For she had been a student at Oxford of the great historian Thomas Hodgkin. Professor Hodgkin was a remarkable Marxist historian who was instrumental in creating the Oxford Extra-Mural Delegacy. He became a confidant of the Ghanaian Independence Pan-Africanist, Kwame Nkrumah. And into this world he welcomed the young Lalage Bown who took up a job as a regional tutor in Ghana in those post-Second World War years. The goal of the Oxford Extra-Mural Delegacy was to provide access to education about politics, history, world affairs to an emerging generation of young African women and men who, because of colonial limitations on access to schooling, had been denied education. Supported by the Colonial Office, Lalage, Thomas Hodgkin and others such as the Danish adult educator Paul Bertelsen, who also began teaching in Ghana dur-

ing Lalage's time. There he brought a vision of a decolonial world, a world where the legacies of capitalism might be undone in uniquely African ways. And, at the heart of the change which Lalage and her early colleagues supported, was the knowledge that only through building African led politics, African led scholarship, African led cultural visibility, African music, literature and poetry. No matter what the Colonial Office imagined, their work was decidedly decolonial, anti-colonial, Afro-centric favouring socialist values over the market domination of the industrial age and the empire. Lalage's vision of a transformative pedagogy was not the colonial idea for the production of clerks and agricultural overseers. Her education was for the Independence movements in Africa and the world, for the building of confidence of political leaders, both women and men. While in the 2020s the concept of decoloniality has re-emerged with new voices and new urgency, her understanding of an education combined engagement with the ancient roots of African knowledge, with western political and democratic thought united by a commitment to a deep practice of excellence in building the architecture of knowledge in Africa's universities. This vision of learning continues to represent an approach to the pedagogies of power that is not fully captured by the contemporary discourses on decoloniality.

The programme of the Dar es Salaam conference began with Nyerere's vision of adult education for a new Tanzania based on African principles of *Ujamaa*, or communal good, of familyhood as presented by the Zanzibari-born Tanzanian Vice-President, Rashidi Kawawa. This was followed by a powerful contribution by Robert Gardiner, the Director of the Economic Commission for Africa, and her former boss at the University of Ibadan. These contributions were followed by contributions from the African leaders of all of the university Adult Education departments represented at the conference. The conversations were about the role of Adult Education in giving voice to the women and men whose knowledge was based in their experiences living in the villages. Two critical discourses dominated the conference: the role of adult education as key to national development and the search for an African way forward beyond the externalities of either western capitalism or soviet socialism.

The genius of Lalage Bown is that she understood the lessons of empire. She knew the power of organized learning for those who were taking over the reins of government from the colonial powers. But she knew that transformative learning had to be much more than an intellectual effort. Scholars could debate ideas, but the deep changes that Africa was crying out for and which we all over the world still cry out for need formal structures for learning, support from universities, awareness, support and funding from governments. The heart of the decolonial intent which Lalage carried with her for her entire life was can be found in the thousands of small, practical, humble, modest and hardworking efforts to translate intellectual dreams into a new architecture of knowledge.

Michael Omolewa and Budd Hall both had the privilege of knowing Lalage, working with her on and off over the years in Nigeria, with UNESCO and with the International Council for Adult Education. We have learned from her stories when visiting with her in her homes. We are thrilled that such a remark-

able group of scholars and friends is contributing to this project. May the Ancestors find the ways with Lalage's help to help us all find a way to learn our way towards a better world.

*Drum Beats of Learning*

Imagine yourself on a warm West African evening  
 Live horns and saxophones of Nigerian hi life pulsating  
 Cold green bottles of Star beer set out  
 Mostly young men, some from the army, some traders some journalists

This is the 'midnight seminar' of the University of Ibadan's  
 Extra-mural studies Department  
 And opening up the late evening conversation about philosophy, politics and  
 science  
 Is our young Extra-Mural Tutor, Lalage Bown

Cheltenham College and Oxford University is where this part of her story begins  
 Not the place one usually thinks of for an African story  
 But Lalage, having studied during the Second World War at Oxford,  
 Met Thomas Hodgkin, historian and former WEA teacher and then Head of the  
 Oxford Extra-mural Delegacy

The Oxford Extra-Mural Delegacy was created at the end of the war to create  
 adult education  
 opportunities for post-war Africans and others to gain the skills needed for the  
 new age emerging.  
 What Hodgkin really had in mind was the creation of a learning foundation to feed  
 and support the independence movements in post-war Africa.

We are not sure how the conversations might have gone,  
 But the radical ideas of Thomas Hodgkin and the  
 Intellectual imagination of his partner Dorothy Hodgkin,  
 (Yes that Dorothy Hodgkin who was awarded a Nobel Prize)  
 Must have been exhilarating

In any case in 1949, at 22, she was selected as the only woman to join the  
 newly created University of Ghana as a resident tutor  
 She was taken to the village where she was to help build her first cottage and to  
 begin offering adult education classes  
 Classes that would add intellectual heat to the growing fires of the independence.

And so began a remarkable life of leadership and institutional development  
 In adult education and higher education as she worked and led Extra-Mural and  
 Adult Education

Departments in Ibadan, Nigeria, Kampala, Uganda, Lusaka, Zambia, Lagos,  
Nigeria and Zaria, Nigeria  
Serving as the Secretary of the African Adult Education Association

Lalage's contributions to adult education, intellectual and even political life during  
her years in Africa are hard to capture  
She brought dignity, respectability, professionalism, and a passion for learning  
and justice  
To each post, each book, each article, each speech and each conversation about  
adult education that she was involved in

She served each university that she worked in with a firm belief that that particular  
university  
At that particular point in history was as good as any in the world  
And she served the leaders, the students and the citizens of each of the places where  
she worked with full respect, focus and dedication

Much is known about Lalage Bown, her legendary achievements as a woman  
academic leader  
Working in the decidedly patriarchal world of 20<sup>th</sup> Century African education  
and politics  
But what we also need to celebrate is her compassion and love  
For her adopted Nigerian daughters  
For her legions of friends in every corner of this vibrant world  
For the music and culture of all parts of the African continent  
And for wonderful late-night conversations with an occasional glass of whiskey

In closing let us say thank you in five of the languages of the countries where she  
worked

Medasse – Akan, Ghana  
Ese gan – Yoruba, Nigeria  
Weebale – Luganda, Uganda  
Zikomo -Nyanja, Zambia  
Na Gode – Hausa, Nigeria

Budd L. Hall, 2018

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