

IN CONVERSATION WITH...

Professor Akilagpa Sawyerr, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana, turned eighty in 2019. CJAS Editor-in-Chief speaks with Professor Akilagpa Sawyerr below to reflect on his life.

Note: The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

CJAS: Good morning, sir. Thank you very much for speaking to CJAS. And congratulations once again on your 80th birthday. We felt that the occasion, the celebrations and all that came out of it such as the photography exhibition, generated a lot of conversations and we thought this was a good moment to talk to you and to publish your views on the many issues for our readers. So we would like to thank you, again, welcome you to one of your homes—the Institute of African Studies—and also to jump right into the interview and ask if you could start by telling us a little bit about your growing up years because you have a very interesting biography.

Prof Sawyerr: Sure. Well, thank you for having me, and I must say the idea of bringing a person like me, whose life straddles the pre-independence and post-independence periods is always an interesting experience. My childhood was fairly straightforward. I come from a rather privileged background. My father was a lawyer and a public figure. The thing about him that I remember was how principled he was, not only in his public life but also in his domestic life. He passed away when I was nine years old. So, I was left to be brought up, together with my other siblings, by my mother, who was a single mother for many years. She had two more children by a later marriage. But for a long time she had exclusive charge of three pre-teens and one teen – it wasn't easy.

Early Years

CJAS: And you were the youngest of your direct siblings?

Prof Sawyerr: No, I was the last but one. Two girls came before me, and one boy after me, followed by our half-brothers. My mother was very dedicated, very committed and tough. She managed to put all of us through secondary school. I went to Achimota School, where I had the benefit of a very good education, as I'm sure you appreciate. So, my childhood was pretty uneventful as far as I can tell.

CJAS: You say uneventful, but with hindsight, in those early years when your father was still alive, was there anything “political” that you remember from your childhood?

Prof Sawyerr: Oh yes. One event I can pick out immediately. My father belonged to the generation before the Nkrumah-type independence struggles; his generation wore suits and neckties, went on delegations to petition the UK Parliament, and so on – a

very genteel kind of politics. I remember one day he came back from a political rally or something, looking very upset. He had to be helped into the house because he was so completely distraught. We were told afterwards that the rally had been violently interrupted by a crowd of young people from the other side of politics, and that the group was led by somebody whose name we all know: Obetsebi Lamptey.

CJAS: What year are we talking about?

Prof Sawyerr: It must have been around 1946 or 1947, or 1948. The point about it was that my father and his type had been used to a regular form of advocacy, where you argued your case, others argued theirs, after which all would go home. Meanwhile, this new breed of political players heckled, threw chairs about, and so on. I recall to this day, how upset my father had been. Thus, the change to a more violent political practice, which was to get a whole lot worse, had begun, and people like my father were unprepared for that. I'll never forget the experience of seeing him so completely baffled by the emerging political culture. That is the one political thing I can remember from that period – and very clearly.

CJAS: I guess we can fairly describe you as an activist. Would you say you were one in Achimota School?

Prof Sawyerr: Not quite in the way I turned out in later life. It was just that I always had difficulty following rules that seemed silly to me, obeying orders that didn't make sense, with the result that I was constantly upsetting my immediate seniors, who were the House Monitors. So reports went from the Monitors to the Housemaster about how 'bad' I was. There was one interesting occasion, when my mother came to the school to see my Housemaster to ask what it was exactly about my behavior that led to all the bad reports I got! I recall my Housemaster struggling to describe my 'offences'. Truth was, he just got reports and he took them forward – he himself hadn't observed anything himself. My mother was very sharp and she did press him, and I remember enjoying the discomfiture of my Housemaster, who couldn't explain or justify the reports he had been sending about me. But I have to admit I must have been quite a handful, making life difficult for my seniors.

CJAS: Did your peers support any of this?

Prof Sawyerr: That's interesting ... I became quite a hero to many for being such a nuisance. There was one very famous incident, when a large number of us were in 'detention' [as punishment for misbehavior of one sort or the other] and the supervising teacher was a Scotsman. I remember him observing us sitting there, making jokes among ourselves. Here we were, supposed to be silent, yet talking and laughing and passing a naughty drawing around. When the supervising teacher told us

to stop, everybody looked down at their books, except me. So he came charging up to attack me. As I tried to escape, I slipped and fell. He caught up with me and slapped me – and I hit him right back!

CJAS: No! And how old were you?

Prof Sawyerr: I must have been thirteen or fourteen. My problem was that, I hated unfairness. I wasn't the only one making the trouble, yet he had picked on me. That upset me, and so when he hit me I just reacted. Colleagues of the time remember that incident to this day.

CJAS: And no doubt. Were they silent or they cheered you on?

Prof Sawyerr: Oh, they cheered me on!

CJAS: To make matters worse

Prof Sawyerr: Absolutely... but, interestingly, the supervising teacher did not report it to the Principal. He knew he was wrong, I guess, so it was never taken up officially; but it was an incredible experience, when you come to think of it.

CJAS: Clearly, your mother was also off the curve of the average parent. Often the parent sides with the authority figure. How did she deal with your being a “nuisance” at school?

Prof Sawyerr: The point about my mother was that she observed me at home and the reason she came to the school was that she never saw any sign of whatever they were complaining about in my behavior. So she was observing me and I was a normal kid going and coming, fighting my little brother every now and then, but who doesn't, you know? But she saw nothing particularly different about me so she couldn't understand those reports.

CJAS: Before moving into your law education, during your time in Achimota were there any political maneuverings by students?

Prof Sawyerr: No. I do not recall any incident that reflected the off-campus political situation during my time, even though I was there from 1952 to 1958, the final years of the national independence struggle.

CJAS: Exactly. Ok so then came Law school, and your early teaching. You moved around quite a bit

Prof Sawyerr: Quite a bit!

Early Career: UK, Tanzania, Papua New Guinea, the U.S

CJAS: You moved to places that normally people wouldn't. Please explain a bit about your own journey, the choices you made, and how these informed your later career.

Prof Sawyerr: I obtained my Bachelor of Laws degree (1962) at Kings College, University of Durham, which was in Newcastle, in the north of England. I then came to London for my Masters degree at the School of Oriental and African studies (SOAS) of the University of London (1965), as well as qualification and call to the English Bar at Lincoln's Inn. For my Masters degree, I had been granted a Government of Ghana scholarship, which obliged me to come back to teach at the University of Ghana, Legon. So, towards the end of my degree period, I informed Legon so I could be offered an appointment. There was no response. Meanwhile, my Supervisor at SOAS had encouraged me respond to an advertisement for a lecturer position at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. Not having heard from Legon, I accepted an appointment in Dar es Salaam. It was when I was about to leave for Dar, that Legon's offer came through – too late! So, my ending up in Dar es Salaam was totally fortuitous. As it turned out, that was one of the best things that happened to me, because I was thrown into the Tanzania of the 1960s. Independence had come in 1962, and I got there in 1964 – at the height of the political ferment in Tanzania's history. I was thrust right in the middle of the African revolution, as it were. What was striking about Tanzania at that time for a young Lecturer in Law like me was the atmosphere of openness to new ideas that prevailed under the leadership of President Julius Nyerere – an extraordinary phenomenon.

The thing about the Dar es Salaam experience was that, at the time, the country was going through a process of actively exploring radical alternatives to the status quo in economy and politics, and there were, therefore, a lot of new ideas and much contestation at the University and within the national political atmosphere generally. In addition, with Dar es Salaam hosting the Liberation Committee of the Organization of African Unity, many of the African liberation movements and the freedom fighters were based there. All this, combined with Tanzania's openness to outsiders who were willing and able to contribute to the various struggles, created an incredible atmosphere which drew in progressive thinkers and scholars from all over the world. Before I went to Tanzania I hadn't been particularly leftist or radical, but I responded to the lived experienced there. That was the beginning of the development of my progressive posture. Not only were we involved in exploring new ideas, radical thinking, but also, there was much reading of the progressive literature. Thus began my introduction to Marxism – in the Dar es Salaam years.

CJAS: So none of that was read in law school?

Prof Sawyerr: Zero

CJAS: Zero? And were all your lecturers in law school British?

Prof Sawyerr: Exactly, regular English types, which was fine. They provided me with a sound grounding in the law and that was important. But in Dar es Salaam, the reality of experience moved everybody on. I recall people who came to join us as fairly regular middle class liberals, but who, by the time they left had adopted a progressive stance. Everybody moved on, I moved on. The interesting thing was that, the radical scholarship at the University encouraged innovation, fresh thinking among the students as well as faculty, which fed back into classroom work and what was happening all round. It was just an extraordinary experience of feeling totally involved and belonging. It also meant that the atmosphere attracted some of the most serious thinkers in the field. For example, Walter Rodney, from Guyana, author of the famous “How Europe Underdeveloped Africa”, was there with us as a Lecturer in the Department of History. There is no doubt he also matured the same way we all did

CJAS: So he was your contemporary?

Prof Sawyerr: Absolutely. Yes, we were contemporaries – in the same study groups, organized and attended the same events, and our two families were very close. There were also others from the Caribbean, like Clarence Thomas. Others from Eastern Europe – I mean top class leftist intellectuals. All this created a ferment which was fed by both the internal debates and activities on campus, and the political atmosphere in the country as a whole.

CJAS: I could be wrong but I feel like we didn’t have the same level of momentum here in Ghana before the 1966 coup as was the case in Tanzania. Can you speculate as to why, especially since we had many of the same radical thinkers coming here?

Prof Sawyerr: Exactly, but it didn’t have the same impact, and that is exactly my point. The Tanzania of that period was quite unique, in that respect. We know that Ghana, too, was open to outsiders, who played important roles in the political and academic spheres, but apparently not quite in the same way, to the same extent and to the same effect. President Nyerere’s personality and approach was an important part of the story. He loved the idea of a university, and encouraged all the critical young minds that were flourishing there. The President could occasionally be seen wandering around the campus by himself, stopping to talk to people. In the result, both the atmosphere in the university and the political culture outside absolutely encouraged, indeed set the tone. You had to be very, very, weird indeed to remain unaffected by it all. So we all learnt. We all grew up. It was just a fantastic period.

CJAS: Ok then after that you’ve taught in a number of places. Please share a little about that. Each of these places came with something. And you also left something. Who were you as an activist?

Prof Sawyerr: From Tanzania I came back to Ghana—that’s a whole story unto itself, which I’ll tell in a minute – but first my time in Papua New Guinea. At the time Papua New Guinea had been politically independent for about 6 years, thereabouts. A few West Africans had begun showing up there. Here was a country that was literally beginning in a new era – straddling a “pre-metal age” and the space age.

CJAS: When were you there?

Prof Sawyerr: I was there from 1979 to early 1985, a critical period of their nation building. As Professor and Head of the Faculty of Law at the University of Papua New Guinea, I was in a position to contribute to the foundation of their modern system and culture, as our graduates would occupy leading positions in law and public administration. In a way, that illustrates the ways in which I have benefitted from living and working in such a variety of places and conditions. I just happened to have been in conditions that enriched my life in so many different ways. So, that was Papua New Guinea. In addition, I have spent time at the Max Planck Institute in Hamburg, Germany; The Open University, UK; in the US at Harvard Law School, Yale Law School, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, Northwestern University, the University of Alabama and the University of California at Berkeley, where I did graduate work leading to a second Master of Laws degree as well as that of Doctor of the Science of Jurisprudence. As you indicated, each of these experiences added a dimension to my, how should I put it, my persona. You can imagine the effect of this variety of experiences, studying or teaching law in all those different environments – and that is by no means a complete itinerary – on my intellectual and cultural formation.

CJAS: And law is not generally known to be progressive per se. Where, I mean how did you find these progressive elements as you moved?

Prof Sawyerr: Well that’s an interesting question, because I’ve been wondering about that myself, of late. I began as a professional, academic lawyer and have remained such. But then my concerns with social reality and my readings in Marxism made it very clear to me quite early on that the form of the law as superstructure was not a given, but is developed for a purpose. Put simply, “the law” is an instrument which is created to serve particular interests. It is not socially neutral. Having been developed, it then has an influence on material conditions. That is the dialectics of it – it is both the outcome but also an influencer of social practice and perceptions. Now, once you look at the law that way your view changes completely, especially if you are at the

same time also committed to the transformation of the social conditions in which you live. The law you teach and research, and the way you do it in, say, Tanzania, Papua New Guinea or Ghana cannot remain the same as what you learnt in the UK or California decades earlier. But if, in addition to that, you take the Marxist view as well, if you see the law as an instrument, you cannot escape the question: whose instrument is it?

CJAS: And for what end?

Prof Sawyerr: Precisely, whose interest is it serving? And this law that I'm teaching, what purpose is it advancing? The other dimension is, if I want to use the law to advance what I believe in, how would it look? To be frank, looking back I don't recall asking myself such questions explicitly. What I developed very early in my career was a posture of not doing anything in my professional life and practice that was inconsistent with my beliefs, principles and commitment. Put more positively, I was committed to devoting my professional life and practice explicitly to the advancement of the things I believed in. That has remained my compass to this day. There are many consequences. It meant, for instance, that I could not look at the law as simply going to court and arguing a case for this client today and tomorrow arguing the opposite. I have nothing against those who do that for a living, but that's not me. It meant I saw the law as an instrument, one that, used in one way, oppresses some, but used differently, could advance their cause as well.

CJAS: In the highfalutin schools, were there any occasions, or were there faculty members who stood out as people you could align with? I mean I'm thinking these days you can think of these schools with their colonial past, and read today in the context of "black lives matter" and "so and so" must fall and all of that, I'm sure it had its version in your time since these movements are not new inventions of the young people of today. Were you ever sidelined or opposed, especially while you were in the US?

Prof Sawyerr: I do not recall any personal experience of overt discrimination or direct involvement in university politics. An interesting variant occurred during my time at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1966/67. This was soon after what was known as the "Free Speech Movement" at that campus, and the student movement against being drafted into the US Army at the time of the war in Vietnam, which morphed into the full-blown Anti-Vietnam War movement in the United States. I don't know how familiar you are with the history of US radicalism, but in those days Berkeley was more than a university campus. The whole city was, in a sense, part of the "Berkeley thing". So here I was, coming from Dar Es Salaam to a campus in the US that was, literally, boiling with political activism.

CJAS: And this was at Berkeley?

Prof Sawyerr: Berkeley in the mid-1960s, yes. So there I was with much younger student colleagues, with endless political rallies taking place. I must have made one or two comments that attracted the attention of my colleagues. As a result, I was chosen to be part of a delegation to present a protest to the Chancellor of the University about something or other. After meeting the Chancellor, we came back to report to the crowd. As we were presenting our report, I remember being pulled aside by a stranger, a Greek chap, who spoke very poor English – I can picture his face right now, as we speak. He warned me not to speak publicly in such setting, to come stand away from the platform with him, and shut up. When I asked why, his answer was simple: the whole place was under security surveillance, and I risked the withdrawal of my student visa and being sent back home if I fronted up in such politically sensitive situations! I took his advice and went home, only to see on television how policemen came to crush the rally, soon after I had left!

The other point, however, was that during that period everybody came to Berkeley – from Martin Luther King to whoever. It was the place to be, if you were politically conscious because what had begun as an anti-draft movement became the anti-war movement, and combined with the civil rights and, later, Black Power movements. It was also the time when the originally local Black Panthers were becoming national.¹

CJAS: And the Panthers were in Oakland?

Prof Sawyerr: They had started in Oakland in response to incidents of police brutality in black neighborhoods. There was one famous incident that helped bring the Panthers to national prominence. With full TV coverage, a group of Black Panther Party activists marched to the Capitol in Sacramento, capital of California, openly carrying rifles, shotguns, etc., at a time when the Governor, Ronald Reagan, was there. Though the Panther activists were disarmed, they read a statement to the world and were allowed to go free, with their weapons – since at the time carrying a weapon was no offence, so long as it was not concealed or pointed at anyone – as the Panthers pointed out to the police!

All these events – and there were many others – exposed one to the changing tone of the American political opposition from the ground up, leading to the events of 1968, not just in the U.S but also in Europe as well, and the growing anti-war movement which was to last till the defeat and withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam in the early 1970s. So I was lucky to be around there at critical moments. You see where the

¹These were youth-led movements in the latter half of the 1960s and early 1970s opposed to the US involvement in the Vietnam War. The Black Panthers were a black revolutionary organization founded in Oakland, California in 1966

variety of experience comes from? Fortuitous presence.²

CJAS: You had another interesting experience in California, playing with a famous band.

Prof Sawyerr: The Grateful Dead³, they became a really big band afterwards.

CJAS: How did you get to play with the Grateful Dead, by the way?

Prof Sawyerr: I did not 'play with them'. In the beginning, they and other bands, including such as Santana, I believe, had regular jam sessions on Telegraph Avenue, a main street in Berkeley, for us students and citizens for free. They were all absolutely a part of us... At one such street session by the Grateful Dead, when I offered to play the bongos, they said 'alright, go ahead'. And when I got going, they were so taken with it. There was just that one occasion, but it shows the kind of atmosphere I'm talking about, the intertwining of 'town and gown', protest politics and culture, in interesting ways.

CJAS: When I look at young people today dealing with black issues, African issues, decolonial issues, black lives matter, there is certain bifurcation that I'm sensing, which, when you think of the 1960s and even back in the 1800s, or when DuBois and his peers were studying about Africa, didn't exist in the same way. Then, folks were thinking of Africa at large. The Pan African agenda. We can say that some of these folks outside the continent—Du Bois and Garvey and so forth—were some the fathers of pan-Africanism. In your time in Berkeley was there this bifurcation, or were there not enough black students within the intellectual space for this to even be an issue?

Prof Sawyerr: Actually, you make an interesting point, because I did summer school in UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) not Berkeley, and I remember an incident which responds to your question a little bit. I had many friends, black as well as white on campus. I remember a particular occasion when I was with my black colleagues when we ran into a couple of white students I knew. I got talking to the latter, only to notice that my black colleagues had frozen into silence. When we were alone, they noted pointedly: 'when you saw them (white friends) you ignored us'. That was a wake-up call for me. It had not crossed my mind that I was making a choice between two competing groups. I was with a group of friends, I saw other friends and exchanged a few words with them. Yet, the original group (black) saw it as me turning my back on them to talk to my white friends – whereas to me, they were all my mates! I'm sure you've had similar experiences? Back to your point: no, there was not enough of an African presence on campus, not even of black Americans – even though we

²1968 was the year in which both Martin Luther King Jnr. and John F Kennedy were assassinated and students and youth protests shook the world.

³An American rock band formed in 1965 in California.

were right next to Oakland – to make it a significant feature. Interestingly, the radical student body, though overwhelmingly white, was very much into civil rights and black issues. I remember one occasion when Oakland came to Berkeley, so to speak. The white student leaders had been championing civil rights, in effect, speaking for the black cause, and so on. On this occasion activists of the black community in Oakland came to the campus themselves during a civil rights rally, and I noted with surprise and no little amusement, the total discomfiture of the white student leaders as these black guys brusquely and with total self-confidence took over what was, after all, their show.

CJAS: How did the white students take it?

Prof Sawyerr: Not too well, I am afraid. While they didn't object, it was clear they had been taken aback, shall we say. They didn't know what to do, they were disoriented.

CJAS: They were used to being the speakers on behalf of the 'oppressed'?

Prof Sawyerr: Precisely. Here were the actual people, taking centre stage – the regular student leadership had to step aside.

CJAS: So what were the folks from Oakland saying? Laying down their objections and their issues in their own way. Not exactly 'university-like'. Beyond the substance of what they said, it was more the fact of their taking charge and speaking for themselves, and the manner of their discourse. It left quite an impression on all. Does that answer your question?

CJAS: Yeah. I mean it's just... from where I sit now it's just disappointing that in 2019 where we sit now there's still not enough of a Black presence and people are still speaking for black people. But in addition to that, where there is a Black presence there's 'we the African Americans', 'we the Afro Caribbean folk', 'we the Afro-Germans' and then the Africans from the continent... And it seems to me we are not helping ourselves with these discrete boxes.

Prof Sawyerr: You are absolutely right, absolutely right. And people like Malcom X and Stokeley Carmichael (Kwame Touré) tried to bridge that gap in my generation. More generally, we had Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, WEB Dubois, George Padmore, Frantz Fanon and others. The problem the leaders had was literally with carrying other leaders and the people generally with them in a real sense. It's been tried before, true. But you're right it is something one should pursue actively today.

The Pan-African Agenda

CJAS: I was talking to a young woman yesterday and she was saying that with the new AfCFTA⁴ the EU is bringing new barriers for African nations. So it's like, okay, Ghana and Cote D'Ivoire are managing to get their cocoa acts together but then the EU will hit us with the narrative about slave labour in the cocoa sector, and it just makes me wonder why there isn't more collaboration to counter those narratives.

Prof Sawyerr: Well I suppose in a sense that takes us to one of the issues which we foreshadowed, that is, the conditions now compared to the conditions in the 1960s and thereabouts. What strikes me is that the leadership of the pan-African, anticolonial struggle in the pre-independence era showed marks of the heroic, not because they were special – they were, by and large – but because the conditions of the time demanded that they mobilize widespread national support for a true national cause in the struggle against anti-national forces. In order to succeed under those conditions, a leader had to have the ability to inspire and mobilize peasants, workers, whoever, around national issues.

You can take your pick among the early African nationalist leaders. While they all had their shortcomings, they were not like today's leaders. One can list a whole range of ways in which the contemporary leaders fall short: one, is the unquestioning acceptance of the global status quo. We still make a lot of noise, but lack real ambition and foresight. Take your point about the recent African Continental Free Trade Area agreement (AfCFTA). Very few of our leaders can genuinely stand up and make the kind of commitments that Nkrumah, Nasser, Sekou Touré or even Kenyatta, could make on behalf of their people. And so it seems to me, one has to recognize the limitations of the current environment on leader quality. Though it is still possible for particular leaders to reflect sufficiently the peoples' true aspirations, the question is how to sustain and actualize that vision.

CJAS: Somebody said the Lumumbas and Sankaras were incorruptible that's why they were killed.

Prof Sawyerr: Well, there you go! But at least while they were around, they were more than just ordinary political leaders. Your skeptics are right, they would have been cut down sooner or later – by their colleague African leaders, who were mostly uncomfortable in their company, or by the outside forces.

CJAS: As happened, anyway

Prof Sawyerr: Literally, in both cases; but even now it still happens. My point is that we've got to a point where political leadership of our countries has sunk to a level of virtual impotence, despite the noise, despite the blustering. When it comes to the Icrunch they don't stand up, none of them.

CODESRIA

CJAS: I'd like to look at the latter or the later part of your career, your activism. You've been in so many places: you've been at CODESRIA as the President; you've headed the Association of African Universities; then, of course, Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana; the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, of which you've also been President. Can you say something about your experiences within these places, and what the vision driving you has been?

Prof Sawyerr: Following my Dar es Salaam experience, I've lived and worked in a variety of contexts, and the things that stand out, which I believe explain my ideological development and formation, were, first, my interaction with progressive African and Third world scholars from all parts of the world, as well as progressive movements outside the academy. I'm talking about the 1970s and 1980s, when there were several networks – African and Third world. I was involved in quite a few of those. A key example was the Dakar-based CODESRIA⁵, founded in the early 1970s under the leadership of Samir Amin, then head of UN-IDEP, initially to bring together African social science research institutions, which became and remains an independent centre for critical social science scholarship on Africa by Africans. CODESRIA fostered networking continentally and across the Third World. It also enabled us to identify persons and institutions we could learn from and work with to advance what we all believed in. That process literally strengthened the work of everybody involved in the networks, so that the collective product was more than the sum of the products of each of us on our own. It also enabled the collective to begin to influence the next generation of scholars throughout the continent, as the accumulation and refinement of insights fed back into the university classrooms and campus life generally. The second feature of the CODESRIA experience was that it occurred at a time when, because of the inadequacy of funding for university education throughout the continent, partly as a result of advice from the Bretton Woods organizations, our universities were under severe stress, barely able to promote quality social research. Under those conditions, the CODESRIA arrangement enabled us to keep alive the drive for quality, progressive social science scholarship on the continent. This was critical to the steady development of generations of progressive scholars down the years. The CODESRIA story has yet to be fully told, but for my generation, it represents a vital link in the chain from progressive scholarship to policy activism.

⁴The African Continental Free Trade Area, was created in 2018 under the auspices of the African Union and at its founding included 28 member countries

⁵The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa.

CJAS: And what amazes me in all of this, is that this was in the era before the internet. How did you do the communicating and networking?

Prof Sawyerr: You know I remember at the AAU in the 1990s we were organizing successful continental/international conferences! The fax, telephones, telegrams and the postal system were all we had – I sometimes ask myself: how did we survive and flourish – with such crude communication technology?

CJAS: Were people more committed then?

Prof Sawyerr: That may be part of it, though it was not just CODESRIA, of course. I haven't really thought about it.

The Association of African Universities

Prof Sawyerr: Yes, now the AAU was another significant part of my trajectory. You know, I made a point earlier that I had decided way back that I would not be involved in anything that would not advance what I believed in fundamentally – it wasn't simply about getting a job. The AAU was an extremely important step, because I went to the AAU in 1993, having worked closely with the organization when I was Vice-Chancellor. The then new Secretary General, Donald Ekong, should be given the full credit for the AAU becoming what it did become. The organization had virtually collapsed, as with other similar institutions in the 1970s and '80s, but Ekong, almost singlehandedly, picked it up and gave it life. I was then Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana and, therefore, given our location in Accra, I was the most obvious support that he had. I gave him all the support I could, given Legon's own limited means at the time. So we struck up a very good relationship.

CJAS: You went back to the law faculty after you were no longer Vice-Chancellor?

Prof Sawyerr: Yes, I went back to the Faculty of Law for a year after my resignation from the Vice-Chancellorship, before taking up a year's leave abroad. All this time, Donald Ekong kept in touch with me, seeking advice on key aspects of the work of the Association, especially research on higher education, which was hardly existent on the continent. We developed a notion to institutionalize higher education research as a viable activity on the continent and secured funding for a project on that topic. On my return from leave, I was invited to join the AAU as Director of Research, with special responsibility for developing and leading the new programme, "Study Program on Higher Education Management in Africa". The programme succeeded in creating a cadre of senior and not-so-senior academics interested in the study of African higher education in all its aspects.

I also led the organization of management seminars for university leaders and prospective leaders throughout the Continent. I remember you attending one of those, no?

CJAS: I attended one of those in Kigali.

Prof Sawyerr: The idea was to upgrade the managerial capacity of our Vice-Chancellors and other university leaders and to prepare future generations, because most of us became Vice-Chancellors with no preparation for managing such a major and complex organization. One of the innovations I introduced was the conception that the actual experience of participants in any of the seminars was the best resource for the training programme. The course programme was, therefore, centred around case studies that drew on the problems and actual occurrences in our universities. We had a few instructors to guide the process, but the main point was the sharing of experiences, the reflection of practice, and so forth. The point was to aggregate such experiences, develop them, place them in their national and international contexts, and enable each participant to draw what lessons they could.

The third and very significant feature of the period was the battle to assure adequate provision for higher education in our national budgets. Remember, that was the time when the World Bank and other donor agencies were persuading our governments that money spent on basic education was of more value than money spent on higher education. At a time of budget stringency throughout the continent, this meant reductions in the already inadequate budgetary allocations and donor support for higher education in most African countries, in favor, supposedly, of basic education. We argued that it made little sense to decapitate the structure of education in order to boost the base – a proper balance needed to be struck. This involved us in a long and bitter battle on the continent, and across international institutions and the donor community. Much of the last eight years of my time at the AAU was committed to this battle, which we finally won. In the end the World Bank acknowledged they had been wrong. I recall an event here in Accra, when a World Bank representative publicly admitted their error. I must confess, that day I lost my temper completely.

CJAS: Oh good!

Prof Sawyerr: I was so outraged – you were prepared to sink our systems on some ridiculous idea you had developed, in the face of unanimous objection by all truly interested parties, and now you come telling us you were wrong all along! But I don't blame him or the World Bank too much – after all, it was our governments that bought into the idea, ignoring local advice and objections! One of the main gains from that battle was its contribution to the demystification of the intellectual prowess of the World Bank. The AAU and its member universities spent time doing enough research

to demonstrate that the World Bank and the donors were wrong. So the defeat of the World Bank position was not because we shouted louder, but because our policy position was better supported by the research.

Having won the intellectual victory, the next thing was to get real results, by getting our governments to drop the false “basic vs. higher education” contest and provide adequate support to higher education, and for the donor community to stop giving all the support to basic education and little, if any, to higher education.

UK DFID was one of the most resistant, with the Minister then in charge known for her total focus away from support for higher education on the continent. In the course of the struggle, I was invited at one point to address an audience in the UK House of Lords, with this Minister present. Long story short, DFID finally relented, and offered the AAU funding for higher education development on a scale we had never seen before. But it just shows that the battle which we fought had effect.

CJAS: And it shows that activism works.

Prof Sawyerr: Exactly, but it was activism of all African universities, combined with hard intellectual work! One last point here. We were able to get the African Union on our side, despite the fact that most African ministers of education were at the time pro-basic and anti-higher education. It took hard work, but finally, in my final year or so as Secretary-General of the AAU, I witnessed the setting up of a higher education section at the AU, with the AAU in an advisory position. So it shows that with dedication, some battles can be won.

CJAS: And as you said, also intellectually it’s not just about shouting.

Prof Sawyerr: Absolutely, that for me is the most important part. It is the preparedness to do enough work to demonstrate that one is making choices. You’re making a choice and I’m making a different choice. I can defend my choice on the basis of good research and evidence – that was the main driver, I think, of our success in that matter

University of Ghana

CJAS: Can we come to Legon and then we’ll go to the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Prof Sawyerr: Yes. Legon I suppose my experience here was at two levels. One, was my role as a lecturer in the interesting times, the 1970s, you remember? Maybe you don’t

quite remember.

CJAS: I was still a student in ‘Tech⁶ in the late 1970s.

Prof Sawyerr: That was the time after the overthrow of the Nkrumah regime and the reaction against progressive ideas on the university campuses in Ghana. I was coming from Dar es Salaam, remember?

CJAS: You came here (University of Ghana) directly from Dar es Salaam?

Prof Sawyerr: Yes

CJAS: Was returning something of a culture shock?

Prof Sawyerr: Culture shock indeed it was. It was almost like “what am I doing here?” At the time I arrived in Legon there were no more than four or five voices saying anything remotely radical, not even radical, just progressive. One was Jawa Apronti, a lecturer at the Institute of African Studies. Very gentle, not aggressive, but completely clear and firm in his convictions – not one to go on demonstrations and so on. There were few others like Eboe Hutchful, Emma Hansen, Chris Hesse of the Department of Political Science and, later, Kwesi Botchwey and a few other colleagues at the Faculty of Law.

CJAS: Were there any women?

Prof Sawyerr: At the time, no – there were so few women academics altogether. When we started (with our progressive agenda) we didn’t see it as a battle across the campus. As I said, my approach was that whatever I taught or researched was aimed at advancing what I believed in. For instance, Kwesi Botchwey (who had just got back from Dar es Salaam!) and I developed and ran a course on the “Legal Aspects of International Trade and Finance” which we used as a basis for opening up a whole range of issues about international trade, investment agreements as applied in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa. For most of that early period, Ghana was under an IMF regime and, as far as I can remember, we even had an IMF official sitting in the Ministry of Finance. I gather the Minister was awfully irritated by his presence, but it just shows you the situation of the country at the time.

CJAS: So, this is before the formal structural adjustment period?

Prof Sawyerr: Way before. This was post-Nkrumah, under Busia. The IMF was here doing everything, and part, therefore, of our contemporary reality. And so, in class we

⁶The University of Science and Technology; it was renamed back to its original name, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, in 1998, that name having been removed after the 1966 coup that overthrew president Nkrumah.

had to deal with the history of the Bretton Woods institutions, The World Bank and the IMF, what they were set up for, and what they were doing here in Ghana and other African countries. Now, here we were, mere lawyers who had never ever studied economics, finance or trade. But drawing on some pretty rudimentary material developed in Dar es Salaam, we built up the course as we went along. We were learning the material as we presented it. But, with the Bretton Woods institutions in town, overseeing policy, which was regularly reported in the media, we were able to draw on real experiences, familiar to our students. That helped make our courses relevant and exciting. Moreover, our method wasn't simply giving lectures, but mostly engaging our students. The content and nature of our classroom discussions appear to have generated interest beyond our own classes and subject areas. Similar developments were occurring in a few other departments as well. So within a couple of years the small number of us 'progressives' were giving lectures on political economy topics to increasingly large and varied student audiences, and participating at lectures of others, all over the campus. We were also involved in study groups with other lecturers and students. Incidentally, there were similar developments on the campuses of other universities, so we were able to call on progressive colleagues at KNUST and UCC as occasional reinforcement. As we built up our voice on campus we were in a constant battle with a powerful group of conservative academics who had dominated campus intellectual and political life since the overthrow of the Nkrumah regime in 1966. By the mid- to late-1970s this group of conservative gurus virtually stopped speaking in public, ceding the campus space to the progressives – a dramatic and palpable shift.

All this coincided with and linked into national political events – from the coup d'état that overthrew the Busia regime, the anti-Union Government campaign against the Acheampong military regime, to June 4 and the coming of Rawlings. This created a bond between campus radicalism and political agitation off campus. This involvement of the student body as well as the lessons learnt and skills developed in the process were to have a profound impact on national political life well into the 1980s and beyond.

CJAS: I always say, for some people the classroom is an activist space.

Prof Sawyerr: That's right.

CJAS: And then the generation that you taught, did they join your ranks so to speak?

Prof Sawyerr: They more than joined our ranks – they took over. That is the point I was going to emphasize. What was striking was exactly this phenomenon, that students were responding not just to classroom work to pass the exams, but they were picking up vibes of all sort which they internalized and made their own and applied in their own

ways. Let me give an illustration of this. During the late 1970s, Gen Acheampong⁷ had this idea of a Union Government which was widely opposed, including by the majority of students. He made the mistake of closing down the universities just before referendum on the issue was to be held. What struck me then, the reason I'm bringing it up, was the number of students who, from wherever they had been dispersed to, would phone me or other colleagues for advice on what to do. Some of these were not our students, not part of our study groups. So, clearly, our general message had gone way beyond anything we could have imagined, and was having an impact at different levels.

CJAS: That was how my own political activism started without me recognizing it, because these university students came to the secondary schools to talk to us.

Prof Sawyerr: Exactly my point. Some quiet students who never took a position in class, or who were not even in our classes were suddenly carrying a version of 'the message'. This brings up a point which I'll repeat for everybody's benefit: you have no idea about the impact of what you're saying, who will pick up something you say and make of it what they will. You have no idea. The lesson for the next generation is: you have no idea the impact your activism will have on somebody, or some things, not just the immediate target you're addressing. Don't ever underestimate that effect, because in many ways the things that happened during that period were part of the buildup to what became 'the PNDC period'. Now, of course, there are pros and cons all round, but the leadership and the activism of that generation who had been students at that time, some of whom are still key players in national life, is so significant. So, the question is, how about now? Who is replicating this phenomenon on our campuses?

CJAS: They are very few.

Prof Sawyerr: That is another worry

CJAS: Please tell us about being Vice Chancellor

Prof Sawyerr: I was in Papua New Guinea from 1979 till 1985 on extended leave from the University of Ghana. By about 1983 I was ready to come back home – despite the extreme hardship of mid-1980s Ghana. I, therefore, wrote to the University about my intention to return to post. There is an interesting story there. I was a Full Professor in Papua New Guinea, having left Legon six years earlier as an Associate Professor. It turned out that there was a rule at Legon that one came back to the position held at the time of departure from Legon, no matter what had happened in the meantime. I took the position that a person was entitled to have their work, publications, etc.,

⁷General Ignatius Kutu Acheampong was Head of State of Ghana from 1972 to 1978, having led a bloodless coup to overthrow the government of the Progress party.

assessed in the normal manner as a basis for determining the position they should occupy on return to Legon. I, therefore, refused to accept the silly Legon rule. So keen was I to return home, however, that after a year of holding out, I changed my mind and agreed to return as an Associate Professor, pending the assessment of my papers, etc., by the University – why they could not do that before I came home, I cannot fathom! It was while making plans for the return home that I received information that I had, meanwhile, been shortlisted for appointment to the position of Vice-Chancellor. Long story short, after much going and coming, while I was still out of the country

CJAS: You were minding your own business.

Prof Sawyerr: Minding my own business, indeed.

Prof Sawyerr: . . . I was chosen as Vice Chancellor by the University Council.

CJAS: Who was chair of counsel then?

Prof Sawyerr: The Rev S G Nimako, as I recall. The interesting thing was that, after studying and discussing the report of its Search Party, Council had gone past the campus 'favorites' and chosen me. And I wasn't even there. This is something which is not widely appreciated.

CJAS: Which means you didn't apply for the position?

Prof Sawyerr: No, never. In those days, one didn't apply.

CJAS: The head of state had the final say, right?

Prof Sawyerr: No and yes.

CJAS: The council proposed

Prof Sawyerr: : Exactly. Council proposed and the Head of State approved. Anyhow, UTAG and the student union had, reportedly, opposed my appointment – I never understood why – and some were agitating against my confirmation. While the PNDC government was reported to be having second thoughts, friends, who knew the scene well, advised me to come home immediately and settle the matter by accepting the appointment. As it happened, I was due in Ghana for another matter (a round of the Valco negotiations). So I was able to come down and accept the appointment.

In the course of the week I was able to attend a meeting of Council, the first since my selection. While we were waiting for start of the Council meeting I was given a letter to sign, in effect ending the tenure of the Pro Vice-Chancellor who, in that capacity, had

been acting as VC, and who was right there in the room with me. I felt something wasn't right about this. My instincts were against beginning my tenure by humiliating my predecessor. In any event, I wasn't taking up the job immediately, as I had to go back and resign from my position in Papua New Guinea and arrange my repatriation. I called the Pro Vice-Chancellor aside, told him I would not sign the letter, and asked if he would consider acting as VC for the two months or so that I would be away. You cannot imagine the relief on his face as he agreed!

At the Council meeting, he, as Acting Vice-Chancellor, led me in and introduced me to Council. That, I was told later, took the wind out of the sails of those members of Council who had come ready to challenge my appointment in favor of the same Acting Vice-Chancellor, who had been my main competitor for the position!

My instinctive reaction appears to have had positive consequences I could not have anticipated.

CJAS: Somebody was praying for you.

Prof Sawyerr: Well, there you go!

CJAS: So at the time you didn't know that the Pro Vice-Chancellor/Acting Vice-Chancellor was part of this opposition faction.

Prof Sawyerr: No, not till I later saw the minutes of the previous Council meeting. For me, the key lesson, and this ran through my whole period at Legon, was: don't put anyone down that you don't have to. Don't be mean to colleagues, especially those in a vulnerable situation, even if they "deserve it". Notwithstanding your 'powerful' position, remain open to all. This approach helped me in several other ways.

Another illustration. My appointment was resented by a powerful group of senior, mainly conservative academics, who felt I was too junior and pro-PNDC. There was little I could do to persuade otherwise – I didn't even try. My approach was to get on with the very difficult job, using all possible help, including those very experts who had been dead against my appointment. I invited many of the latter to lead boards, committees and teams on matters in which they were undoubtedly expert. This helped win me acceptance in no time. Another factor appears to have been my resolute defense of university autonomy, standing up to the PNDC government on matters which we thought were strictly university matters – in a manner that very few could have done, unless they had the kind of relationships that I had.

CJAS: Can you give an example?

Prof Sawyerr: I will give you one example. The PNDC had decided to remove student leaders for leading a demonstration on campus and showing disrespect to the Minister of Education and the government.

CJAS: Remove?

Prof Sawyerr: Yes, throw them out, expel them. This came out in a radio announcement, which reflected the bellicose posture of government! Luckily we had a wonderful Chairman of Council, Professor Samuel Sey, formerly at KNUST. With his help, we managed to persuade other Vice-Chancellors to join us approach government to sort things out. Though we made clear our disagreement with the move by government, we had to give something back in the negotiations. There was no time to come back to consult the Executive Committee before settling with government. We had to take a decision – for the affected students to move off campus, but be allowed on campus to continue their coursework and take their examinations. When I reported back to the university, I was amazed at the positive response and the credit accorded me personally by the Executive Committee and the whole university community.

Long story short, within about two years of my appointment the university began to work together again as a community – faculty, administrators, students and workers – though it was never easy.

CJAS: So trust had been built?

Prof Sawyerr: Absolutely, based upon work done and attitudes displayed, and so on. Think about it – here we were taking over a university which we had been closed down for over a year – you remember?

CJAS: Yes

Prof Sawyerr: The campus had been occupied by workers for a year or so before my return. The place was run down, academic work had completely declined, research was not happening. So the task of the Vice-Chancellor at that time was to lead the charge to restore the facilities, revive academic work and restore the environment for productive learning and so on – not easy. That was the first charge. The second charge was to keep the university community together and running effectively, and that involved protection from outside interference—and there were many examples of clashes. The line we took was that if as students you went to town and rioted, the police could break your heads. I would be very upset, but could do little about it. But while you remained on campus we would protect you, even when the government was unhappy about your demonstration. As long as students remained on campus, they had our protection. After a while, the student leadership got to appreciate the

difference between demonstrating on and off campus. It was very difficult for everybody – to keep the university's core academic ethos at the forefront of our concerns and also manage other things as we went along. So, for me, that was the main task of my tenure – to help put the university back in a place where it fulfilled its true mandate as a place of learning and development.

CJAS: Looking at universities as you've seen them from all your vantage points, is it possible to have an African university, a university that has an African ethos, one where you know the classroom teaches those things that enhance our wellbeing as Africans?

Prof Sawyerr: It depends on how you conceive your 'Africanness'. I have an allergy to any fixed notion of Africanness, 'our' culture, and so on. Culture is not static. It absorbs, it rejects, it changes and it keeps going, although the essence may remain. But it is constantly responding to circumstances. Now there were universities or at least institutions of higher learning in Africa before Europe started, and you want to go back to that? I regard as African the university that situates itself firmly within its society, intellectually and emotionally, at the same time reaching out to the world. Universities are not islands unto themselves. So it's got to reach out to the frontiers of knowledge, wherever they are – even with your enemy, no? So you're rooted, you are focused, but you still provide a periscope for your society to view and draw from the whole world of knowledge. That is the key point for me – it is a tricky conceptual issue.

CJAS: So for example, in this university, and I guess most public universities in Ghana, you don't get any points for writing textbooks. But we are teachers in addition to being researchers. So if there is no incentive for me to write a textbook because it is not valorized, and if I then have to use textbooks from America or wherever to teach, and they approach so-called 'underdevelopment' from a certain perspective, how can I encourage my students to think about development from a certain perspective?

Prof Sawyerr: Well I think you've put your finger on a very important part of the answer to your question. It shifts from the being 'African' to what do you have to do right, to enable you remain rooted but still reaching out. That's the question of process, method. But you've drawn my mind to a very important point, because to be rooted you must understand yourself, you must know the soil in which you are planted. As I was saying earlier, it's about researching as a basis for understanding and reinforcing what you set out to do...You cannot know yourself, understand yourself and define your progress if you don't study yourself.

CJAS: What if you study yourself from someone else's perspective?

Prof Sawyerr: You can, but you've got to be able to, at least, also have your own perspective –that's what will make your university an African university, or not; not your wearing a dashiki and putting on the appropriate headgear. You are on the right path when African knowledges and African perspectives, nevertheless reflecting global standards, reinforce what you're about.

CJAS: Can it happen?

Prof Sawyerr: It can, but it cannot happen until you first address the question, what do we need to do to achieve that? You must first aim at it – I'm not sure many people do – but even when you aim at it, you've got to find out, what do I have to do from where I sit now in order to get there? Straight forward, as a question, but the answer will be complicated because you'll be challenging all kinds of interests, both local and external, but at least you'll be clearer about the task you have taken on. Your question implies, and I agree entirely, that the sad situation is that nobody much is working along those lines today. So, back to your big question – there's work to be done, essentially clarifying what we're talking about, and then working on the processes, real concrete processes, given our limitations, that would take us from where are to where we want to be. At the AAU, for example, as I was saying earlier, we were using donor funding but we were still managing to oppose bad donor policies and win over thinking to our perspectives, at least to our way of approaching issues.

CJAS: You may not remember this but as a young researcher, you offered me advice in those days when everybody was chasing consultancies. You said to not reject those monies, one could take up the consultancies, but use them strategically, and to make sure that I also got some research publications out of them or the data generated. I have never forgotten that, and it is advice I pass on all the time.

Prof Sawyerr: Absolutely. And that is right, isn't it? What it means is that you don't operate from a dogmatic perspective. You are realistic, not opportunistic, because you are at all times focused and targeted.

VALCO and Mining

CJAS: I cannot let you go without hearing about VALCO⁸ and what we've done with the mining sector.

Prof Sawyerr: Oh la la! Yes, you're absolutely right.

⁸Volta Aluminum Company, originally set by Kaiser Aluminum and Chemical Corporation and Reynolds Metals Company to build a plant in Tema for smelting alumina into aluminium, and now owned by the Government of Ghana

CJAS: So your work on the VALCO renegotiating committee has been consistently hailed as an example of negotiations and work from the Third World where the underdog can 'win', or at least can do something. And I think it's important for younger people, for more despondent young people, to hear what is possible, however frustrating and challenging.

Prof Sawyerr: Let me begin by saying that the VALCO story is properly "the Akosombo story". From the national perspective, the VALCO project is simply a by-product of the Akosombo enterprise. The long history behind the Akosombo power dam goes back to colonial times, but the turning point in the story was when Kwame Nkrumah and the CPP took up ideas that had been floating around and developed them into a national project. It was a major project. The essence of the project, as the Nkrumah government saw it, was that Ghana could not industrialize without a secure power supply base, yet here was the mighty Volta River flowing tamely into the sea – energy wasted. It had been known from the 1920s that damming the Volta River would give the country all the power we needed for industrialization. So, after many studies there was agreement on building a dam at Akosombo. At the time that was a huge project which could produce power multiple times what the country was consuming or likely to consume. But, in order to get financing for the building of the dam you had to show the lenders that you had a ready purchaser of the power to guarantee you steady revenue – that was the best security for their loans. So the project needed a consumer of power on a scale that would cover your investment and enable you amortize the loans. In the end, Ghana made an agreement with an American company, Kaiser Aluminum Corporation, and a Canadian partner, to set up a plant at Tema to use power from the Akosombo plant to process alumina into aluminium. The arrangement was for Kaiser Aluminum to bring in alumina from its plants elsewhere, for smelting by VALCO, using cheap Akosombo power, and return to Kaiser. This ensured that Ghana had a purchaser whose payments could guarantee revenue for the amortization of the loans used in the construction of the power dam. But by the 1970s it was quite clear that the rate VALCO was charged for power was very low. Why would Nkrumah and his government have agreed to such a low rate, we wondered during the course of our negotiations in 1983–85? After the negotiations, I went back to check from the documents of the period. Two things stood out. First, Nkrumah was looking beyond VALCO, taking account of the fact that the surplus power from the dam would constitute the basis for the ambitious national industrialization plans they were then developing. If it would take a give-away power rate to VALCO to secure the power he needed for the country, so be it. Secondly, I found out that the agreed rate was not as bad at the time it was agreed as it became a decade later. In 1962, power rates were generally low globally, so although the VALCO rate was low, it was not outrageously so at the time. What made the rate offensively low

⁹The Akosombo Hydro-electric Dam is part of the Volta River Authority, which has supplied the vast bulk of electricity for industrial and domestic use in Ghana since the early 1960s. For further reading see James Moxon (1984); Stephan Miescher (2016) and Tsikata (2006)

by the 1970s was the dramatic rise in energy prices worldwide, following the creation of OPEC¹⁰, and the fact that the agreement allowed for no variation to accommodate such changes!

CJAS: For how many years?

Prof Sawyerr: For the life of the agreement!

CJAS: Including where the bauxite was coming from?

Prof Sawyerr: Absolutely. Let me explain. Ghana had bauxite which could be processed into alumina for smelting in such as the VALCO plant. The original agreement gave VALCO a twelve year period within which they could bring in alumina from their plants in the Caribbean to process, after which the importation of alumina would be penalized by the imposition of import duties.

But to get back to my story, a further factor, which is often ignored, is that, because of the very low rates of inflation across the world at the time, freezing the terms of agreements for a period did not seem so terrible. In any event, a balance had to be struck between, on the one hand, having a fixed low power rate for VALCO and a national power source like Akosombo – which kept us going single-handedly till a few years ago – and, on the other hand, no Akosombo. Nkrumah chose the former. Fast forward to the 1970s, by which time the VALCO rate had become clearly unacceptable. Other problems surfaced – for example, at the time we began negotiations in 1983 VALCO had not paid any taxes whatsoever, zero!

CJAS: And this was written into the original agreement?

Prof Sawyerr: No. There was a tax holiday period, after which VALCO was due to start paying taxes. They duly filed their tax returns, but the IRS did not collect the taxes – it was clear that, after the overthrow of Nkrumah, everybody took their eye completely off the ball, as far as VALCO was concerned!

CJAS: Lord have mercy!

Prof Sawyerr: Indeed! Another example – under the agreement, payments by Kaiser to VALCO for its services were made, not to the company in Ghana, but into a bank account in New York to ensure ready access by the foreign creditors. So money in hard currency was deposited in a New York bank, for services rendered by a Ghanaian company – which is what VALCO was – during all those years when Ghana was starving for hard currency!

¹⁰The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Companies

CJAS: Wow

Prof Sawyerr: We allowed the retention of such money in a foreign bank, virtually constituting an interest-free loan to Kaiser. But nobody, neither the VRA nor the Bank of Ghana, was chasing VALCO to repatriate or account for it. It was not till 1983 that this came to our notice in the course of our negotiations.

CJAS: Somebody was having a great time here.

Prof Sawyerr: Right! We were so outraged. We insisted on VALCO regularizing the New York bank situation immediately and paying all taxes they owed – and they did so, promptly!

Anyway, in addition to these, we had all sorts of anomalies frozen for the life of the agreement. When the PNDC¹¹ came to power at the end of 1981 they met a situation in which there had been a campaign against the agreement by many people, including Kwesi Renner, PNDC Secretary (Minister) for Lands and Natural Resources. A decision was taken to renegotiate the agreement with a view to removing the offending parts. I was then in Papua New Guinea, minding my own business, when I received an invitation to come and join the team. And it was only after my arrival that I found out I was to lead the whole process – can you imagine?

CJAS: And that's also when you came to find out you were going to be VC.

Prof Sawyerr: No that came a year later. Now, here was I, never having done any negotiations in my life.

CJAS: But you were teaching trade law?

Prof Sawyerr: Yes, trade and investment law in general, can you imagine? And the rest of the team was no better placed! Anyway, long story short, the team was made up some very smart Ghanaians, I mean really incredibly bright and committed, as well as some public servants who were more senior, and quite different from the young ones. Such was the intensity with which we worked, that half a year or so was enough for the public servants to drop out – they couldn't keep up with the pace and mode of work. So it was left to this group of young Ghanaians, who took on the task of understanding the agreement and learning enough about the global aluminium industry, to make the right judgements about what was and what was not feasible, what was and what was not acceptable. Now, we had the benefit of outside consultants, some of whom joined us at the negotiation table. However, the bulk of the work, the thinking, the laying out

¹¹Provisional National Defence Council, led by Flt. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings

and choice of options, was done mainly by the Ghanaian team members. This is very important to emphasize. From the very start, we had been receiving extremely helpful reports and advice from our outside consultants, which helped us enormously. Early in the piece, however, we began a practice whereby, for each negotiating round, and before the outside consultants arrived to join us, the Ghanaian team members would work our way through all the material, raise all the issues, and see where we needed information or advice. I would come from Papua New Guinea a week or so ahead of time for the negotiations. The entire Ghanaian group would go on a retreat to the VRA facilities at Akosombo or Akuse, and work day and night. This enabled us to master both the agreement and the global industry thoroughly. We had to get a full appreciation of, among other things, the key players in the industry, what the market was doing, what would be feasible and what not. This mastery of the industry and the market turned out to be key to our ability to match the industry experts deployed by Kaiser toe to toe. So, although we began virtually from scratch in terms of knowledge, negotiation skills and industry experience, leading the opposition to underrate us, our performance improved steadily, changing the dynamic of the negotiations in our favor long before the end.

A second, vital, factor in the success of the negotiations was the way in which the PNDC, led by Jerry Rawlings, gave the team full support and complete independence. Nobody was allowed to interfere with our work – not ministers, not public servants, nobody. We reported to government through the Minister, Kwesi Renner, who, though knowledgeable, committed and supportive, allowed us a free hand in all technical matters. In sum, we were given space and protection as a team to work to the best of our ability, to make our own technical choices. At no point did anyone tell us what to do or not do. Of course, as Team Leader it was my duty to keep the Minister regularly updated, and on occasion brief Chairman Rawlings directly. But no interference. I emphasize this point because, in many ways, that was a critical condition for our success. I suspect the situation would be different today.

A further illustration of this trust in us occurred in the third round of the negotiations. By the end of the second round of negotiations we had got VALCO engaging on the basis of broad principles we had developed and put forward, as they were unable to counter the case we had made. To our surprise, they came back for the third round with some really silly proposals, proposals that would reverse the progress made the previous round and take us back where we started. Clearly, they were not used to being put as much on the defensive as they had been in the second round. Do you know how we responded? We called their bluff, and refused to consider their new proposals. We told them, in effect: 'further talks along these new lines are a waste of time; here are the principles along which we were making progress in the last round, which represent our position; if you can make counterproposals in line with those principles, send them to government. As for us, our job is finished!' We actually broke

off the talks and sent them packing! Believe me, that was not done out of pique, but as a calculated measure aimed at changing the dynamic of the negotiations. We had two things in our favor. First the Volta lake had dropped down to a level where power generation above a certain capacity would put vital equipment at risk, with the result that generation had been reduced to the extent that the whole country was suffering from load shedding and VALCO was receiving only enough energy to run at less than half capacity. Our trump card was that, by international convention, in such circumstances, the manager of the dam and power plant had the last word on how much power could be generated safely at any time. Thus, VRA had an unfettered discretion as to whether, and when to increase production and, therefore, the supply of energy to VALCO. This put a heavy squeeze on Kaiser, since it required an increased supply of metal from VALCO to meet its obligation to supply customers with whom it had binding contracts all over the world! So reduced supply from VALCO was going to be very damaging!

CJAS: So you knew all this?

Prof Sawyerr: Sure, we did. That was part of the homework we had done. For instance, we knew that VALCO's production at the time accounted for about 11% of the total US supply of aluminum, while Kaiser itself was entirely dependent on it for its forward contracts, having closed its smelters in other parts of the world because of their high energy rates. We had them by the short hairs!

A course open to Kaiser was to call on pressure by the US and the International financial institutions (World Bank, IMF) and/or take us to arbitration under the agreement. Remember, this was in 1983/84, when Ghana was on a desperate campaign for World Bank and IMF support. So, when we broke off the talks, some people in government panicked. I won't mention names, but a member of the PNDC called me and said, 'Ei Aki, I hear you have sacked the guys'. I said, yes. And he said 'Ei, what are we going to do now?' Indeed, I was called upon a week or so later to explain to members of the PNDC the background to our action, because VALCO had held a press conference the very day of the breakdown, to announce, in effect, that the Ghana team had rushed into the stoppage, despite their giving us reasonable counterproposals at the table. So, in my discussion with the PNDC I demonstrated to their satisfaction exactly what the Kaiser "offer" meant – where it would take us and where it wouldn't.

As I said earlier, Kaiser had the option of taking us to international arbitration under the agreement. Knowing that, we had sought to make all our proposals so reasonable that we could defend them before the industry, and the international community, including the World Bank and the IMF. Indeed during the period of the breakdown of the talks the PNDC Secretary for Lands and Natural Resources and I took a trip to

Washington DC to explain our position to the Bank and the IMF.

To sum it up, the third round breakdown was a calculated gamble: (i) Ghana had control over VALCO's access to energy under the drought conditions; (ii) we knew from our studies that they could not do without VALCO supplies for long; (iii) they could not justify their exaggerated advantages under the agreement under prevailing conditions. Within a couple of months VALCO submitted new proposals along the principles we had developed in the second round of the negotiations. From then on real negotiations started. Tough negotiations. It was interesting to see Kaiser change the leadership, and progressively upgrade the level of their team as the negotiations progressed – bringing in a Senior Vice-President to replace the leader and senior lawyers from Kaiser Headquarters.

It was an amazing experience. But it just supports the point you started with – that we can do it; it's not easy and we need to study carefully the necessary preconditions; but we can do it.

CJAS: You can't be lazy, you can't be sloppy.

Prof Sawyerr: Also VALCO could not “reach” the team members. We were mostly at the level of lecturers and assistant lecturers at the university, but we held our own and, crucially, they couldn't reach or influence any of us. This was another critical feature of the story. I cannot praise my team mates enough for their brilliance, hard work and, above all, their total honesty and commitment.

CJAS: What did you walk away with?

Prof Sawyerr: Really, pretty much everything we could have wished for under the conditions of the time. Oh, one more thing I should add – there were more fights among the team members on the issues than at the negotiating table. Our discussions were fierce, even contentious. Everything, every position or proposal, whatever the source, was open to vigorous challenge. With the result that hardly any important issue came up at the negotiating table that had not been canvassed and subjected to fierce discussion within the team. I cannot overstress this point. The intensity of internal contestation by team members gave our positions and proposals a robustness that manifested at the table.

CJAS: So there was no silencing of people's perspectives within the team?

Prof Sawyer: Oh no.

CJAS: Everything was on the table within the team?

Prof Sawyerr: Yes. You had to be ready to defend your position or suggestion against “friendly fire”. In one instance, two of the younger members, having discovered something of great interest, brought it up for discussion. The idea was contested so vehemently that the proponents afterwards locked themselves in their rooms, and it took a senior colleague to persuade them to come out and resume normal life. Yet their discovery clarified an aspect of the work which in the end proved of great value.

One more thing. I made the point earlier that we were tried to make our proposals as reasonable as was consistent with our final goals – not demanding the Earth! Thus, while driving hard against the excessive giveaways in the agreement, we were also concerned that whatever we did, VALCO should survive as a reasonably profitable enterprise. They shouldn't make giant profits at our expense, but they should make enough profit to keep going. Although we were against the excessive gains of the past, they were still an important business here and a major buyer of our power; without their custom power sales could suffer. This approach paid off, since VALCO remained a reasonably profitable operation, though no longer making the killer profits they had been making, while Ghana got a more balanced deal.

CJAS: And they paid their taxes?

Prof Sawyerr: Promptly!

CJAS: So going forward, under President Mills you looked at some of the contracts with gold mining companies.

Prof Sawyerr: Yes. I was appointed by President Mills to lead the renegotiation of an existing mining agreement, while another agreement was negotiated “behind my back”. The second agreement got us worse terms than we had got months earlier in the renegotiated agreement. The second team had some of the same people, some of the same issues, but a different outcome. One step forward, two steps back!

CJAS: And the one you did under President Mills, and the one behind your back, were both under President Mills?

Prof Sawyerr: Yes, and same Minister, same Minerals Commission in both cases.

CJAS: What changed, that can be said on record? There were some members of your team on both teams?

Prof Sawyerr: Yes, but they were there as public servants, presumably subject to superior direction in that case?

CJAS: And they eventually agreed to the watered-down contract?

Prof Sawyerr: In effect, yes.

On Being an Nkrumahist

CJAS: My very last question. Are you an Nkrumahist and are you a Pan Africanist, and why or if you're not, why not?

Prof Sawyerr: I am very much a Pan-Africanist, and I'm Nkrumahist, not in the sense of adoration for his person – outstanding and incomparable as he was – nor of accepting everything he said, wrote or did. I am Nkrumahist in the sense of sharing his vision for Ghana and Global Africa, his ideology and the policy positions he took, and what he achieved for Ghana and Africa in the course of his life. When you think about the things he combined in his lifetime, it's remarkable. You know, few people appreciate that Nkrumah came to the Gold Coast at the end of 1947, right?

CJAS: Sounds about right

Prof Sawyerr: So, he came back to the Gold Coast at the end of 1947 after decades abroad; came with no cadres or political organization of his own; and no money – yet, in less than two years he was able break away from the UGCC¹², the party that had brought him back to the Gold Coast, and form and lead a political movement, the CPP, that won every election it ever contested – even under colonial administration – until its proscription in 1966! That was something! He must have got something right.

In addition to Nkrumah's political mobilization and organizational skills, were his ideas on where to look and what to do: on every topic from Pan-Africanism to industrialization. As to the latter, research I did on two of the industrialization projects initiated by the Nkrumah government – the Ghana Rubber Estates Ltd., and GIHOC Pharmaceuticals Co. Ltd. – showed the seriousness of the industrialization drive as well as the quality and thoroughness of the planning and preparation that went into it – contrary to the blanket criticism to which the industrialization effort was subjected after the overthrow of the CCP government in 1966. The first project I studied was the Bonsaso plantation, now Ghana Rubber Estates Limited. A state-owned rubber plantation was started in the early years of Independence, on the understanding that it would take up to seven years for the rubber to mature. Simultaneously, plans were put in place for the establishment of a rubber processing factory, expected to be ready and operational by the time rubber became available for processing in about seven years! Compare how we do things today, where we build a factory before

¹²The United Gold Coast Convention

organizing the inputs! Anyhow, by the time of the overthrow of the CPP government in February 1966, all the machinery for the factory had been delivered; construction of the factory had started and was proceeding apace; 12 Ghanaians had gone for training in tyre production by the equipment supplier, who had agreed to second 15 technicians and an expert as Managing Director on a 3-year contract. It was anticipated that the factory would be completed and the equipment installed, ready for production by the end of 1967, giving Ghana a state-owned, state-controlled integrated rubber project for the manufacture of tyres and other rubber products. Though it would be necessary to import some of the raw rubber initially, production on the state plantation was expected to exceed the capacity of the factory in a matter of a few years, after which there would be enough for the factory and other local manufacturers and, possibly, for export. Alas, immediately after the 1966 coup d'état this national project was abandoned and both plantation and factory ceded to Firestone Tire and Rubber Company of Ohio, giving the foreign private company, not only control over major national assets and production facilities, but also a near-monopoly position over the manufacture and distribution of tyres and related rubber products in Ghana. All this for an investment by the company which, in, addition to being but a fraction of the value of the assets, was, by reason of the guarantees given it, entirely without risk¹³.

My point is that, of course Nkrumah made many mistakes, and not all his plans would have worked, but from my study and reading, he was on the right track. Had we stayed the course, made necessary the adjustments and improvements, and learnt the right lessons it, we wouldn't be where we are now – a steadily deindustrializing neo-colony.

CJAS: That is so true.

Prof Sawyerr: So my admiration for Kwame Nkrumah is not simply because he was such a genius, but specifically because he combined qualities which very few of our leaders have had, qualities which are precisely what we lack today. If we could go back, review the track he was laying, correct the errors, and update to suit our contemporary reality, we'd be a whole lot better off than we are now. That has been the basis of my Nkrumahism, to this day.

CJAS: And Pan-Africanism?

Prof Sawyerr: I grieve when I see the degree to which our leaders today just pay lip service to the notion of Pan-Africanism, even as they undermine it. For example, many African countries have signed on to the [African Continental Free Trade Area](#) (AfCFTA) agreement established by the AU. At the same time several of our

¹³See Sawyerr, Akilagpa Sawyerr (1977)

countries have individually signed Economic Partnership Agreements which allow European Union countries to bring goods into our countries duty-free. Here in Ghana, for instance, firms from Europe and other places are setting up car assembly plants to produce for export. You know what that means – that they're within the AfCFTA barrier and, therefore, will get all the benefits and advantages of Ghanaian produced cars. So, is my skepticism about our Pan-Africanist preachments justified or what?

CJAS: You're right.

Prof Sawyerr: Even without taking sides, are our leaders being consistent? Smart? It's so transparent that the Europeans and others are thinking ahead of us. And you get them sending this or that prime minister to come and flatter our presidents and leaders, week after week! Who is thinking about how Pan Africanism should work for us?

CJAS: What do we need to do to make the free trade agreement work?

Prof Sawyerr: As it stands, it has little meaning. What are we going to export to Nigeria? Look, before you draw up a free trade agreement you must study your production patterns across the sub-region, the continent. Who is producing what, who can produce what better, and so on. Maybe it's been done. But if so, I see no evidence of it. I have seen no evidence of the leg work required to make the free trade agreements work. On the contrary, I see steps that are counter to the very notion of running a regional or continental free trade area. Meanwhile, all your key investments are from outside. You got oil here in Ghana, but you pretty well sold away all our oil rights for the next 20 years or so. Where's the policy space for developing, for instance, a local petrochemical industry? And who is thinking about that now? I mean really, I could send you into a major depression, because the situation is even worse than I'm describing.

CJAS: So what message can you leave for the already depressed millennials and next generations?

Prof Sawyerr: Looking back at the record of Ghana as I have known it, there are still some positive signs, because one thing which is clear is that, under appropriate conditions we have the resources, the talent and the skills to move.

CJAS: I think so too.

Prof Sawyerr: We have the skills to move not through the stages, but by leapfrogging, and I think it is absolutely crucial that our young ones are made to realize and to believe that they can innovate their way out. The question is, what are the supportive

conditions which will, one, make them do so on a regular basis and, two, transform their ideas into effects? That's the matter for our consideration, but the encouraging point is that it is still doable. What is lacking are the political underpinnings which will enable it to be done for all our benefit. So, my word to the next generation is, as it has been for years, that the talent and the capabilities that we have, capacity such as we showed in the VALCO negotiations and several other instances, that talent is as good as anybody else's, anywhere in the world. Let the youth develop and work it, and make it available to be used. When Bill Gates and his young colleagues were working in Silicon Valley – conditions are never quite the same, of course – they were working in small sheds and corners, as I understand it. It took something to trigger the transformation of their ideas into what we know today. Whatever it was, had they not been doing the ideas thing, in the first place, nothing would have triggered it. So our young ones should keep doing the ideas thing, keep it hope alive.

CJAS: Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

Prof Sawyerr: Thank you.

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