

# FULBRIGHT CHRONICLES INTERVIEWS

## FEMI MIMIKO: FORMER VICE CHANCELLOR ADEKUNLE AJASIN UNIVERSITY

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### ABSTRACT

Professor Femi Mimiko has served in a variety of leadership roles in Nigeria's higher education. His Fulbright Fellowship at the US Military Academy at West Point helped shape his career. It provided him a global network and honed his sense of the importance of understanding others. Although a recognized leader in Nigerian higher education, he is always committed to his students and a teacher at heart. In this interview, Professor Mimiko suggests that the advancement of society is the essence of higher education.

**Keywords:** Africa • democracy • development • Fulbright • higher education



### INTRODUCTION

Femi Mimiko is Professor of Political Science at Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Nigeria; where he also trained, earning a PhD in International Relations in 1992. He was at different times, Head of Department of Political Science, Obafemi Awolowo University; Head of Department of Political Science, Dean of Faculty, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Acting Vice-Chancellor; and from 2010 to 2015, Vice-Chancellor, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria.

Professor Mimiko has held numerous prestigious international positions including SSRC-MacArthur Foundation Visiting Scholar at Brown University in Rhode Island; Korean Foundation Visiting Fellow at The Academy of Korean Studies in Seoul; Senior Fulbright Scholar and Visiting Professor at the United States Military Academy (West Point) in New York; and African and African-American Studies Associate at Harvard University in Massachusetts.

Professor Mimiko's research interests include Comparative Political Economy, International Relations, Development and Transition Studies, along with Higher Education Governance. His particular focus has been on how the international political economy affects the development process and its implications for governments, aid agencies, multilateral institutions, and civil society organizations. As a development practitioner who frequently

consults with international organizations, Femi Mimiko facilitates the design and implementation of strategies for the consolidation of peace and security in conflict situations, and enhancement of democratic governance across continents.

An accomplished teacher, researcher, and keynote speaker at international conferences, Femi Mimiko is the author of some 120 research publications, and six books. He is a public intellectual who contributes insightful articles on critical national and international issues in several newspapers and magazines published across the world; he has been interviewed frequently in important international electronic media, including the BBC. Professor Mimiko has helped shape the direction of public policy, especially on education in Nigeria.

## **INTERVIEW**

### **1. Why did you apply for the Fulbright program?**

I had always desired the Fulbright fellowship; it is widely regarded as the flagship of all fellowships in my area of study. The program administrators at the US Embassy in Abuja sent just a single application form to our university. Being a relatively new university, it was our first shot at the Fulbright. Suffice it to say that when I got selected, I was not just so excited that I was going into the Fulbright program, but that through me, my university was having a window open into one of the most prestigious fellowships in the world. Another reason for my excitement was that I was headed for the US Military Academy – with its global reputation – as a visiting professor!

### **2. How did the Fulbright program affect your career and personal life in the long run?**

My career trajectory cannot be fully accounted for without the Fulbright! I had been a Reader (Associate Professor) for some years when I got the fellowship. When I returned from my Fulbright, I was appointed Chair. Shortly afterwards, I was appointed Deputy Vice-Chancellor and moved over to Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU). Two years later, I was appointed the Vice-Chancellor of Adekunle Ajasin University, on secondment from OAU.

### **3. Have your cross-cultural experiences altered any aspects of the way you interact with people around the world?**

The first cross-cultural experience that my Fulbright provided was the opportunity to interact with the men and women of the US Army. I was blown away by their dedication, deep knowledge, patriotism and capability. I came away with the impression that the American soldier is trained to be able to fix anything and deal with every challenge. The Fulbright, and all the conferences and meetings we were able to participate in, all made it possible for me to meet so many people from different nationalities, working

on different intellectual and social programs, with massive impact on human understanding and the quality of human life. It is exciting that I still maintain my contacts with many of the folks I met some 20 years after my Fulbright experience. I am a testament, if you will, to the underlying motive of the Fulbright program – fostering global understanding.

**4. The Fulbright program in Nigeria is exclusively for people who teach in the university to travel to the US to study or do research. Would you encourage researchers to go for the Junior Fulbright Program (before earning PhD) or the Senior Fulbright program as mid- or late career scholars?**

From my experience on the Fulbright program, I am of the very strong opinion that scholars at all levels of their intellectual engagement – early, mid, or late career scholars – should take advantage of the Fulbright program. The advantage, and fillip it adds to your career are simply unquantifiable. As well, what it means to the body of knowledge that exists in your country, upon your return back home to the development of your career, is not something that should be missed or underestimated.

**5. From 2010 to 2015, you were a Vice-Chancellor (President) at Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko in Ondo state, Nigeria. What were your greatest achievements?**

As Vice-Chancellor, I worked very hard to deepen the quality of University's academic program. We recruited good staff, especially at top level, from across the country. We brought in a number of very senior professors from other parts of the world. We supported many of our younger academic colleagues to study for and obtain the PhD degree from universities here at home in Nigeria, and abroad. Our curriculum was updated, and we received the National Universities Commission (NUC) accreditation; as well as that of all the relevant professional accreditations. We quadrupled funding for research, and got everyone busy undertaking one research project or the other. We put in place a governance system that enabled us to run our academic program unbroken for the five years we were in office. We also demonstrated that it was possible to engage students in such a way that you bring out the best in them. My students had very deep trust that our administration was going to do the right things always, and always protect their interests. We encouraged them to organize within the entire gamut of student unionism; gave them responsibilities that built their self-confidence, and launched a student's work-study scheme that enabled several of them to put in two hours of work every day for the University and get paid twice a month. This enabled many of the indigent students to get by, funding their own education. It also put the entire student population on the pathway to recognizing the dignity in labor.

**6. A lot of professors who have been vice-chancellors would go into politics after their tenure or migrate to other countries. Why did you return to your teaching job in the university?**

Quite a number of journalists had asked a similar question of me, and I often wonder why. For, the truth is that I did not start my academic career with the plan to become a Vice-Chancellor. I wanted to be a teacher and researcher, and later, when I had gotten up enough in the system, I aspired to be a full professor. And so, for me, the Vice-Chancellorship was by-the-way. After spending five years as VC, I had already missed my students so much, especially graduate students with whom I had a lot of robust intellectual engagement, I could not wait to get back to class. Indeed, when the University community began a project of getting the Ondo State House of Assembly to amend the laws so that I would be able to get a second term of five years, and continue my good work, I publicly declared that I was not available for a day longer than my five years.

I also did not consider going to the NUC as several of our colleagues would readily do immediately after their vice-chancellorship; again, for the same reason, that I had missed my students and needed to get back to the classroom. I will give anything to continue to have the opportunity to help deepen the intellectual outlook of younger folks. That was why I chose to be a lecturer in the first place. Let me add, however, that one thing I craved, after my return to OAU, was the desire to replicate what we did at AAUA elsewhere, preferably on the plane of a bigger and older university. That explains my attempt to become the Vice-Chancellor of two of Nigeria's first-generation universities, OAU, in 2017, and University of Ibadan, in 2021. Unfortunately, this did not work out. I guess, from this lengthy response of mine, you have an idea why I did not consider anything outside of the university system after my vice-chancellorship.

**7. You have been very vocal on local and international issues in recent times. Do you have any plans to join politics?**

I guess I have always been vocal on national and international issues. I did my very first newspaper article for The Guardian back in 1987. It was a critique of the direction of Nigeria's foreign policy. I went on to run a regular weekly column, at different times for Hope newspaper, Akure; and later the defunct Lagos-based Comet, the progenitor of today's The Nation. A good number of those articles were published in a book under the title, "Democradura: Essays in Nigeria's Limited Democracy." I have been privileged to be consulted on sundry issues of relevance to national development and global understanding, on several electronic media, including the BBC; and many newspapers and magazines, across the world.

The truth, even in the realm of pure intellectualism, is that I have come to a stage now in my career where I do more policy related research and publications. I have always held what I call a utilitarian view of scholarship: the entire purpose of the academe, of scholarship, of intellectualism, is the advancement of society. This is what has guided my scholarship.

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Now to the issue of whether I want to go into politics, my attitude is that, yes, I am a Political Scientist, but I do not have to be a partisan politician to function as a Political Scientist. I see my usefulness only in relation to identifying the more responsible elements in the political space, people who mean well, and I give them the little support I am able to, especially in sharpening their focus on developmental issues, and deepening their commitment to the execution of their mandate, either as elected or appointed officials.

#### **8. Several academics are in Nigerian politics but the political system has not been very efficient. Why is this so?**

That one is an academic is not a guarantee that they would do well in public office. A number of factors account for responsible leadership, and good education is just one of them. This is often taken for granted, but the truth is not everyone possesses the capacity to get things done. I have lived and researched long enough on the subject of development, and political and economic transition to know that many folks who seek positions, or are drafted into same, do not know a hoot about what to do with such big titles and the big offices they hold. There is also the issue of integrity, character, social commitment and clarity of thoughts and vision. Of course, courage of conviction is also essential. As an office holder, are you strong enough to push back on some of the more destructive proclivities that you find entrenched in the system; or are you the type that would just let things pass, allow sleeping dogs to lie, because you do not want to be put down as a disrupter? So, the point I am making is that there are so many issues that account for effectiveness in public office. Yes, if you are an academic, your education may predispose you to acting well. But beyond that, there is nothing that says that being an academic, ipso facto, makes you a competent, efficient, or responsible player in public office.

#### **9. How satisfied are you with the number of Nigerian scholars who have the chance to study, research, or teach in the US through**

**Fulbright; and to what extent is Nigeria's diversity reflected in the program by way of inclusiveness and accessibility?**

I am a member of the Fulbright Alumni Association of Nigeria (FAAN), where hundreds, I dare say, of us, are. I actually gave the keynote address at our 14th Annual Conference held in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, in April 2022. I have found these academics, including our junior colleagues who went through the junior Fulbright program, quite impressive and doing well in their different areas of endeavor. I would wish that the American government makes more slots on the Fulbright available to Nigerian academics.

**10. Given your experience in international relations and development, what impacts do you believe the Fulbright program can play in the global peace and development today?**

The primary goal of the Fulbright is to facilitate global understanding. When people work in silos, when they do not interact, it is pretty difficult to understand each other's cultures and tendencies. But with interaction, you develop deep understanding of the different cultures and can cultivate the attitude of engaging other cultures on the basis of respect. All of this helps promote peace and stability in the global system. I wish the world had had many more Fulbright alumni. It certainly would have made the world a better, more secure, peaceful, and enjoyable world.

**This interview conducted on August 20, 2023 has been edited for clarity and to assist in reading.**

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