

The Contributions of Chief Obafemi Awolowo to the Growth and the Development of Nigeria During First Republic



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Abstract

This study examines the personality of Chief Obafemi Awolowo in the making of Nigerian nation in the First Republic. The study found out that Chief Obafemi Awolowo was a Nigerian nationalist and statesman who played a significant role in Nigeria's independence movement during First and Second Republics. The study notes that Chief Obafemi Awolowo was thrice a major contender for Nigeria's highest office. He was a key player in the intra-party power tussle that erupted in 1962 that led to disturbances in Western Region House of Assembly. Also, the study examines major challenges faced by Chief Obafemi Awolowo and how he eventually became the Federal Commissioner of Finance and the Vice Chairman of the Federal Executive Council in 1966. The study employs primary and secondary source materials including books, journal articles and other scholarly publications to interrogate the study. It concludes that Awolowo was responsible for much of the progressive social legislation that made Nigeria a modern nation today.

Keywords: Nigeria; Obafemi Awolowo; Economy; Nation; Politics

Introduction

The Yoruba speaking people are found not only in the Western Region Nigeria but also in other parts of West Africa (Dahomey and Togo, and as far as Brazil and Cuba). Therefore, elements of Yoruba speaking people forming the majority of the population in Kwara State [1].

The Yoruba form one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria with a history of centralized political systems, a common historical culture, and tradition. In the words of Professor Lloyd, Yoruba culture is remarkably uniform for a people so numerous and inhabited such a vast area [2]. Remi Anifowose opines that party politics did not begin in Western Region, Nigeria until the emergence of the Action Group which was founded by Obafemi Awolowo to champion the cause of Yoruba nationalism against the rising tide of Igbo nationalism led by Nnamdi Azikwe, the National President of the NCNC [3]. Hence, Awolowo was the motivating force that led the Pan-Yoruba movement which stimulated the political consciousness of the Yoruba.

Obafemi Awolowo's Background

Obafemi Awolowo was born in a village called Ikene on 6th March 1909, in colony and protectorate of Sothern Nigeria as it was then called under British rule [4].

Awolowo Oyeniyi was one of the most influential nationalists in the African Continent. His vision and tireless activities defined

a modernist Yoruba political project in an emergent Nigerian post-colonial nation-state after decolonization process in the 1940s. The scene community was in religious flux at the time of Obafemi's birth in the first decade of the twentieth century [5].

At the outbreak of the First World War, 1914 to be précised, Awolowo started his educational career at the St. Saviors Anglican School, Ikenne. Then, his father was still alive. Awolowo settled down to his studies and began to show early signs of his devotion to scholarship by maintaining top grades in all his elementary school subjects and by the time he was fully admitted to school, he topped the class throughout his career in the junior school [6].

With the death of his father in 1920, there was an abrupt cessation of Awolowo Oyeniyi's schooling and all the hikes and career aspirations which he had systematically nurtured were remorselessly dashed. Awolowo served as a house boy for several years in the strange land serving from one master to the other in search of stipends to pay for schooling. Also, due to his financial constraints, he moved from one school to the other in Abeokuta resulting in transfers to as many as fair different schools within a short period. Awolowo pulled himself up by the bootstraps [7].

However, Awolowo gained admission to Wesley College, Abeokuta and began to show the stuff he was made of. Due to his determination and tenacity, he displayed his hatred of injustice and disapproval of hierarchical stratification between juniors

and seniors, a common tradition in secondary schools in those days. He disapproved the bullying of juniors by seniors [8].

Surprisingly, Awolowo developed an interest to study law in spite of his financial blues and tribulations in paying his school fees. By 1928, the young Awolowo took correspondent courses (distant learning programme) in English, Commercial Knowledge, Booking, Business method and shorthand. He became a shorthand typist to earn some money to finance his course.

Awolowo's Trip to London

On August 14, 1944, Awolowo sailed to the United Kingdom to study law. He decided to embark on his studies abroad without his family to lessen his financial burdens [9]. Awolowo passed his final LLB exams in two years with Second Class Honours on October 3, 1946. Obafemi Awolowo was called to the Bar on November 18, 1946 as a member of the Honourable Society of the Inner Temple in London. While in London, Obafemi Awolowo published a book titled "Path to Nigerian Freedom" in 1947, where he advocated for a Nigerian Federation of Eight states including the Middle Belt, Bornu and Calabar/Ogoja and Rivers state. Awolowo wanted states created by the British on the basis of linguistic and cultural affinity which his critics dubbed 'tribalistic'. Fortunately, Awolowo was vindicated in 1948 when the Macpherson Constitution of that year introduced a quasi-federal constitution for Nigeria for the first time. Obviously, this was the motives that Awolowo needed to establish and organize the Egbe Omo Oduduwas in order to harvest and consolidate the political fortunes of the Yoruba nation [10].

Formation of Egbe Omo Oduduwa

Obafemi Awolowo formed the umbrella body for the propagation of the cultural identity and political unity and development of the Yoruba as an integral part of the ethnic nationalities which constituted Nigeria as one colonial political entity. His thinking principally was to rally his own ethnic stock for unity purpose in fostering a political strategy that simply adopted charity begins at home as its central ethos [11].

Awolowo established himself as the spokesman for the Yoruba of Western Region delegation at 1948 General Conference on the review of the Richards Constitution of 1946 held in Ibadan. Awolowo Obafemi was an unrelenting advocate of unity in diversity of the ethnic nationalities which formed the component part of the new country which Lord Fredrick Lugard had married together on 1 January 1914 as 'Nigeria' [12]. It was gathered that Obafemi Awolowo purposefully spearheaded the formation of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa in order to do all within his power to infuse solidarity into the disjointed tributes that constitute the Yoruba ethnic. He wanted to boost the Yoruba morale, rehabilitate their self-respect and imbibe in them the confidence that they are an important falter in the forging of the federal unity of Nigeria.

Again, in the making of the nation, Awolowo reckoned that if the component ethnic groupings in what he referred to as "mere geographical expression called Nigeria feel happy among themselves; if they are free within prescribed limits to order their lives and advance their culture and if the solidarity and devotion exhibited within their ranks can be sublimated to the cause of the nation, then the federal unity of Nigeria would have been assured" [13]. Obafemi Awolowo strongly believed in self-determination for each of the main ethnic blocks in the federation of Nigeria. He strongly opposed marginalizing the minority ethnic groups by the three majority's tribes in Nigeria [14].

Formation of the Action Group

By 1951, Chief Obafemi Awolowo founded Action Group [15]. He laid the framework of this newly established political machine in the mold of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, the Yoruba cultural organization he had founded earlier in London.

From inception, the Action Group led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo made the populist programmes of free education and the task of nipping out illiteracy, universal health services and poverty alleviation, the cardinal principles of his policies. Welfarism was the cornerstone of its programmes [16]. Awolowo liked to describe himself as the Chief organizing secretary of any political party that he had the good fortune of leading. Awolowo was a Master of Political Games. Chief Obafemi Awolowo, who was First Premier of the Western Region during one of the sittings of the House, notes that:

Since its accession to power in 1952, this Government has constantly and consistently, with the regards for the unity of the Nigerian Federation, placed the interests and welfare of the people of this Region above all other considerations. Its policy and programme have been designed to benefit and have in fact benefited rich and poor alike, sinner and saints, the peasantry and the working class [17].

However, a five-year Development plan for the Western Region was presented to the Western Region House of Assembly in 1955 by the Premier, Chief Obafemi Awolowo. The white paper proposed an expanded programme of road improvement and tarring the improvement of urban and rural water supplied, the general expansion of social services and the development of product and industry. A front of £6,000,000 was obtained by the Government while an additional £4,000,000 was sourced from the Western Region Marketing Board (WRMB) for the execution of the Development plan.

According to Chief Obafemi Awolowo as cited in Akobi, O. Benjamin that:

I am sure that all Honourable Members will agree with me that the core of our wealth in the region is cocoa. It is the very life blood of our economy.... Furthermore, it has been realized by all of us for some time now, that an economy which depends mainly,

as our does, on a simple export crop, is a precarious economy. The Government is fully alive to these dangers, and steps being actively taken to remove them [18].

The objective of the 1955-1960 plans was to achieve the increase in agricultural and industrial production which was expected to facilitate a steady rise in income and standard of living for the people of the Western Region.

Western Region Crisis

Saturday, 12 December 1959 was a great watershed in the history of the Action Group when the party lost a very important federal election its leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, had anticipated to win. This election was significant in because Nigerian politicians and significant parties were awarded that the party that won the majority of parliamentary seats in the Federal House of Representatives was going to be the recipient of sovereign power when the British Colonial Administration transferred it on 1 October 1960 [19]. Also, the election was to determine the balance of power between the major political parties in the Federation since it preceded the grant of political independence to the country. The electioneering campaign that preceded 1959 election up to that time was most expensive, intensive, protracted and sophisticated election campaign in Africa [20]. Due to the deep and notorious ethnic nature of Nigerian politics, to a very large extent, ethnic and regional considerations, rather than good party programme, determined which political party got people's votes. Consequently, Chief Awolowo Obafemi became the leader of opposition in the Federal Parliament rather than the Prime Minister he had hoped to become [21].

In the preparation for the independence of Nigeria, in 1959, the Government of the United Kingdom indicated its willingness to grant independence to Nigerian parliament moved and passed a motion to that effect. Consequently, on January 14, 1960, there was motion calling for the British Government to grant self-rule or sovereignty to Nigeria on October 1, 1960. It was moved and passed in the Federal House of Representatives. As regards this important motion, the Government kept Awolowo and his opposition group in dark. They only heard the news that such motion was coming up. Sir Abubakar moved motion and seconded by Mr. Raymond Njoku, the Minister of Transport (NCNC). On July 29, 1960, the United Kingdom parliament passed 'Nigerian Independence Act, 1960', which provided for independent Nigeria [22]. Awolowo did not attend many of the official functions and ceremonies that were organized to mark Nigeria's attainment of independence as he was not invited in the way that his office and contributions to Nigeria demanded. Obviously, it was as a result of the deep-rooted animosity between the Government and Chief Obafemi Awolowo that led to ugly situations [23].

Despite the fact that Chief Obafemi Awolowo boycotted all the independence celebration ceremonies, he and his wife attended

the night of September 30, 1960, where the Union Jack was lowered and replaced by the Nigerian Flag. Also, Chief Awolowo attended Independence Dinner which took place on the night of October 1, 1960, where he and his wife were seated far away from the high table that could hardly recognize the faces of those who sat there. This incident created a sense of aggravated insult and humiliation in the personality of Chief Awolowo and his wife as some ex-colonial officials bore unspoken ill-will against him for the role he played in the struggle for the Nigeria's Independence 1960 [24].

Before Awolowo embarked on his ambition for the office of Federal Prime Minister, he was keen as ever on putting this region (Southwestern) on a sound economic footing as a major player in industrial and commercial concerns. He raised the minimum wage of workers from the 5 shillings of 1954 to five shillings and sixpence on April 1, 1959. He incorporated the Western Hotels Limited which invested in the building of the majestic premier and Lafia hotels in Ibadan where industrialists and tourists could have decent accommodation and cool their heels. Chief Obafemi Awolowo set companies and empowered them with government funding to shore up their working capital.

These include Western Nigerian Development Corporation (WNDC), the Finance Corporation, and the Western Nigeria Housing Corporation. The Western Nigeria Ministry of Industries was the main supervisory department of government which incorporated these mega-corporations.

WNDC under the leadership of Chief Obafemi Awolowo floated a large number of industries and companies wholly owned by the government or held in partnership with several foreign investors. These include: National Bank of Nigeria, Wema Bank of Nigeria, Great Nigeria Insurance Company, the Nigeria General Insurance Company, the Nigeria General Insurance Company, Gravel Enthoven and Company, Lagos Airport Hotel, Vegetable Oil, Cocoa Industries, Odu'a Textiles, Wrought Iron Ltd, Union Beverages Ltd, Sunga Company, Wemabod Estates, Western Livestock, Fisheries Services Ltd, Caxton Press, Epe Plywood, Askar Paints, Nigeria Crafts and Bags Ltd, Nipol Plastic, Phoenix Motors, and several others. Today, many of these companies are still viable and have been consolidated in the Odu'a Group of Companies which is regarded as the largest conglomerate in the history of Nigeria [25].

The 25-storey building known as Cocoa House was built started by Chief Awolowo's administration. Chief Obafemi laid the foundation and saw its completion by his successor as the crowning glory of his party's success story. After completion in the sixties, the building remained the tallest in West Africa for decades thereafter [26].

Chief Awolowo's term in office as the premier was valid until December 1961 but he resigned his premiership and vacates his seat in the House of Assembly two years ahead of his mandate. Ironically, those who wanted independence postponed

indefinitely were the beneficiaries of these selective royal honours in 1959 and 1960. The British Government was very pleased to hand over the reins of government to the northerners on October 1, 1960.

An opposition leader could be charitable and part the government on the back when its policies are good and commendable. In this regards, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, opposition leader, demonstrated this maturity. Unfortunately, he was no pushover, either.

Because of his stand against the Federal Government, Balewa encouraged the administrator, his personal physician, to issue proclamations and decrees confining and restricting the movements all the leading political leaders in the Western Region including Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the leader of the Opposition in Lagos, to remote villages in the region in October, 1962, while Akintola and his followers were given preferential treatment and treated with kids' gloves. Awolowo, a top federal lawmaker, was abruptly relocated from Ikene his hometown to the mosquito-infected fishing village of Lekki Island in Epe by the administrator.

Moreover, Chief Awolowo was arraigned alongside 27 of his associates for allegedly plotting to the overthrown government of Balewa. He was sent to jail for ten years in 1963 with the leading lights of his party. The government was determined to silence the opposition once and for all.

Awolowo appealed against the judgment at the Supreme Court, the Chief Justice, Sir Ademola, the Prime Minister's friend, and his two expatriate colleagues, wasted no time in discussing all their grounds. But the acting Supreme Court Judge Louis Mbanefa, an Igbo man, wrote that Chief Awolowo could not be pronounced guilty because the evidence of his Chief accuser was not corroborated by any other witness. Just before Chief Obafemi Awolowo was sent to prison, the Federal Government decided that it was a good time to split the Western Region into two and it duly seated the Midwest region on August 10, 1963, after a referendum. In spite of sustained agitations, no states were seated in the east or north. Chief Obafemi Awolowo observed this and raised alarm and advocated for Midwest Region, he was arraigned for treasonable felony. Chief Awolowo was very lucky to win his freedom again at his second treason trail [27].

On April 2, 1963, Chief Obafemi Awolowo went into the witness box to give evidence in his own defense in a marathon effort which lawyers present in court described as a brilliant and sterling performance and which the judge described as very interesting. He defended himself for sixteen days, he poured scorn on all the allegations of a violent take-over of government by him and his men with the use of torchlight and ammunitions, none of those could be produced in court. As he was standing in the box, Chief Awolowo said it was the legitimate ambition, to want to succeed as the head of government in any future election. He voluntarily resigned because of his ambition.

Before, Awolowo was sentenced to ten years in prison, he welcomed any sentence the judge might impose on him even though, he did not agree with the judge's verdict. He noted that his concern was not for himself by his imprisonment might do harm to Nigerian for three reasons.

On April 10, 1964, the appeal lodged by Awolowo at the Supreme Court in Lagos was heard. This time, the Federal Government was confident that it could afford to relax its earlier ban on Awolowo to have a solicitor of his choice from Britain most probably due to the pressure of public opinion. The prophetic words of Chief Obafemi Awolowo while he was in courtroom came to pass as the soldiers who carried out the January 15, 1966, coup showed no mercy to their victims.

Attempt to Avert Civil War

Shortly after Chief Obafemi Awolowo was released from Calabar prison on August 3, 1966, he joined some groups to prevent the escalation of the crisis. On August 11, 1966, there was a meeting of the Yoruba people to adopt a common agenda in the ensuring constitutional discussions to determined Nigeria's political future as well as to discuss the looming political crisis in the country which hung in serious dilemma after the massacre of Ibo civilians in Northern Nigeria in the July 1966 revenge coup and the murders of the Head of Supreme Military Council, Major General Ironsi and Governor Fajuyi in Ibadan on 29 July, 1966.

However, Nigeria was heading for civil war and colonial Adebayo was eager to rally the people of the west to forge a common front. At this meeting in Ibadan, Chief Awolowo was elected by acclamation by his colleagues and his erstwhile foes as the undisputed leader of the Yoruba people shortly after the Military Governor vacated the chair. From that movement, Chief Obafemi Awolowo once again became the de facto political leader of the Yoruba people and the defender and protector of their interests. Awolowo joined some groups that included the National Conciliation Committee which met Ojukwu in May 1967.

Chief Awolowo declared four principles in order to induce the northern-dominated federal military government to sue for peace with embittered Easterners. He also made it known that to the war to keep Nigeria one would only be legitimate if the West and the Midwest agreed with North which was what eventually happened.

Chief Obafemi Awolowo somewhat foresaw the terrible things to come. Civil war was one of these. While he was in prison, he had warned his compatriots against the breaking up of Nigeria into a number of sovereignty states which would not only do permanent damage to the reputation of contemporary Nigerian Leaders but would usher in terrible disasters which would bedevil us and many generations to come.

After the outbreak of the civil war in 1967, Awolowo in concert with the Yoruba military leaders, took steps to get the Yoruba not only to participate in the war effort but to use that

opportunity to have a seat and a role in the Armed Forces of Nigeria that was bottom heavy in favour of the North and the Eastern Region since independence on October 1, 1960.

Chief Obafemi was approved the Chairman of the Federal Executive Council of Nigeria on May 19, 1967. In that capacity, he represented Nigeria at the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference in London in 1969.

He was confirmed as a Statesman of genius after he successfully fenced off all discussions about the Nigerian Civil War. Awolowo used his connection shortly after he was appointed to nudge Gowon on to create thirteen new states in Nigeria before Ojukwu declared secession in July 1967. In order to keep the unity of Nigeria, Awolowo once again initiated a brilliant strategy that Nigerian government should change its currency which Biafran economists and its leaders did not anticipate. The then government changed the currency which actually affected Biafrans [28].

Chief Awolowo's dreams came true in his lifetime. He had wanted thirteen states created after a plebiscite based on linguistic affiliation.

Awo's Stimulation

It is very apt to say Chief Obafemi Awolowo was a very good stimulator maybe it was due to knowledge he acquired from outside the country. Obafemi saw the usefulness of the television, light, and water, convinced his people and brought to the Yoruba people of Nigeria. On secularity of Nigeria, Chief Obafemi Awolowo notes that it is very good for the religious institutions in the country to pray for the success of the government ... if they are in the state of confusion that such governments have good programmes. It would be wrong and futile for religious bodies to pray for the success of a manifestly satanic administration [30].

Also, Awolowo wish religious bodies should pray for the reformation of such governments, clergymen should serve as apostles of welfare, simply the way they are challenges of oppression and injustice; since they are challengers of oppression and injustice since they work closely with the downtrodden and in the areas of greatest poverty. He stated further that they have the direct relationship with the communities of the poor people; clergyman should be main development partners of the government. He advised that clergymen should fight modern-day slavery, fraudulent schemes, disintegrative and anti-cohesive loyalties and the innumerable machinations of reprehensible, predatory and anti-democratic Nigerian politicians called modern day black slavers [31].

Conclusion

In his effort in the making of the nation, Chief Obafemi Awolowo warned Nigerians that the introduction of second-hand clothing into Nigeria would kill Nigerian industries. They hated him for that. Today, no Textile mill is standing in all of Nigeria, while second-hand clothing business booms and so is

unemployment [32]. In order to appreciate the efforts of Chief Awolowo's government and the welfare of people, two students per secondary students in Ibadan were taken on a seven-day excursion round the Western Region. At the end of the excursion, the nationalist and Pan-Africanist, Chief Awolowo who was the Premier of the Western Region of Nigeria, explained to these students why he did free and compulsory education, free medical, seven shillings and sixpence minimum wage for workers, the first Television in Africa was tested, he laid the foundation of the cocoa house which was the tallest in Nigeria as at that time, the teachers' college and roads, etc. under the leadership of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, there was a vision, there was purpose and, of course aim.

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