

Opinion

Remembering Obokun High School

By Edwin Madunagu

THE year was 1964, 49 years ago. I was in the final year in Obokun High School, Ilesha, present Osun State. A board was placed for members of the school's debating society to express their opinions on current affairs. The authorities preferred international or foreign affairs since, I now believe, the school's authorities wanted to avoid being dragged into the bitter political struggles then going on in the country. It was widely known that the senior students who agitated for the board, including myself, were, even at that age, deeply interested in politics. One day, I placed an article denouncing the appointment of Moise Tshombe as Prime Minister of war-torn Congo Leopodville (now the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC). I called Tshombe a national traitor and the murderer of Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime Minister of the country.

As soon as I placed the article and withdrew, one of my classmates, Isaac Aluko (later Aluko-Olokun), moved to the board. Isaac and I were academic rivals. I watched as he read my article; and I observed at a point that he was frowning. As soon as he finished he re-entered the classroom, took a sheet of paper and left again. When he re-emerged he went straight to the board and placed his response. As far as I can now remember, the thrust of Isaac's response was that the people of Congo-Leopodville had the right to choose or appoint whoever they wished as Prime Minister. Later, the argument became verbal, with our classmates watching. It was a hot and bitter argument, which I ended by simply walking away, not simply from the argument, but from the school compound.

Isaac Aluko and I, of course, graduated from Obokun High School at the end of 1964 - he, to proceed to Aiyetoro Grammar School to do a Higher School Certificate programme and I, to return a few months later to Obokun High School as a junior teacher and a resident assistant boarding house master. Isaac rose to become a top Nigerian banker, economist and public servant. There are two observations I wish to make on this narrative. *First*: Throughout my

debate with Isaac there was no ethnic sentiment or any other *ad hominem* allusion from either of us or from our noisy spectators. Although we spoke both in English and Yoruba, no one was in doubt about my ethnic origin. The closest to personal "attack" I can remember was Isaac saying that each human being had his or her own strength. But I did not wait to hear him elaborate.

The *second* observation is this: Although we were both passionate in making our different points, I now know that our positions were both abstract and undilectical. We did not examine - nor were we equipped to examine - how exactly Tshombe was appointed, what historical circumstances led to this appointment and what made the execution of the decision possible. In particular, we did not examine in what historical circumstances and through what mechanisms the right of the Congolese people to choose their rulers was exercised in that instance. The fact, as I learnt later, is that there was no election and the appointment was made by non-Congolese. The country was embroiled in a bitter civil war in which the American government and the United Nations had intervened militarily and diplomatically. For the former it was also an "anti-communist" war.

Shortly after my "historic" encounter with Isaac Aluko, I was involved in another debate. The venue was the school hall of Ilesha Grammar School, a nearby secondary school. It was between my school, which I represented, and the Grammar School represented by a student whose name I have now forgotten. The subject was the participation of church leaders in active partisan politics. My position was that church leaders should not take part in active partisan politics - as we saw this activity in those days across the globe. I cited Archbishop Makarios, the president of Cyprus and President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam, a fundamentalist Roman Catholic ruler in a predominantly Buddhist country.

I argued that a church leader or activist who wished to engage in politics should first re-

sign from the Ministry. Why? Because, as I argued, (political) participation of church leaders carried dangers for the Christian doctrine and credibility. That was at least a decade before I heard of the "rebel church" in Latin America and of Camilo Torres, the Columbian Roman Catholic priest who became a guerrilla fighter while still affirming his faith. Much later I read Fidel Castro's statement that if the martyred Ernesto "Che" Guevara was a Roman Catholic he would have been proclaimed a saint!

Before I left Obokun High School (to return a couple of months later as a teacher), I was involved in an open confrontation with a teacher. I was a day-student, and had to trek a long distance everyday to and from school. I was a school prefect. One day I came late to school and, unfortunately, for me it was a day the teacher responsible for a "catching" late-comers decided to enforce the rule. He detained the late-comers, including me, in front of the main classroom bloc. I felt a bit humiliated as a school prefect. But I stood there with other students - unfortunately junior students on this particular day! The teacher then asked us, late-comers, to pick the dirt that littered that part of the compound. I inquired if I was included in the punishment, and he said "yes". I revolted.

I told the teacher that he must first remove me as a school prefect before I could engage in that punishment, that I would not join junior students to serve that punishment with a school prefect badge on my chest. De-throne me, and I will join the punishment. I challenged the teacher. When he did not take up the challenge but rather insisted I must do the punishment, I walked away from him and from the school. I went home. When my mother saw me returning from school so soon after leaving, and also noticed my countenance, she knew something had gone wrong, and started weeping. To cut a long story short, my mother had to go to the school to plead (not for the first time) for my recall. She met with the Principal, Reverend

Adedayo, and was asked to bring me.

A few days later I was taken back to the school and to the principal's office. The elderly reverend asked why I did what I was reported to have done. I stated my case very calmly. The principal looked at me for about half a minute and then asked me to join my mother outside and wait. Shortly after, we saw the teacher enter the principal's office. When he came out my mother and I were called in to see the principal again. This last meeting with the principal was an anti-climax: he commended my mother, warned me to be good behaviour, and asked me to go home and resume my schooling the next day. And that was the end of the episode.

Up till today, 49 years after this experience, I cannot say, or guess, how the discussion between the principal and the teacher proceeded. I cannot even say whether the principal's decision to discharge me almost unconditionally was taken before the principal's meeting with the teacher (in which case the teacher was just called to be informed of the verdict) or the teacher was involved in the decision. I did not, and still do not, know the principal's assessment of the principle I threw up in this case. All I know is that I was not asked to carry out the punishment I had rejected, I was not removed as a prefect and I was recalled to the school to serve as a junior teacher (Mathematics and Religious knowledge) and a resident assistant boarding house master with a tiny Class One student, Gbadebo Aromolaran, as my "boy".

Long after this incident, when I had become a revolutionary socialist, I once initiated a debate on the mode of treatment of a compatriot who had deviated or even betrayed the cause. I argued that such a compatriot must be given full honours for what he or she had done for the struggle, formally and decently suspended from office, and then put on trial. The sanctity of history must be respected at all times. There should be no falsification or rewriting of history in order to justify current policy or course of action. This principle, in the way I have stated it here, is a central one in my life. I now remember it was first enunciated in Obokun High School, Ilesha. So are my *leftist orientation* and beliefs in *organised collective action*. This last "acquisition" is a story for another day. Obokun High School, I salute you.