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Benson in defence of history

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Chief T.O.S. Benson has continuously been in the political news as long as I can remember. He is a reporter's delight. He also make news through his informative and educative journalistic writings. Since his method is polemical, lively and frank, editors find his writings publishable. Beyond that, Chief Benson takes you several decades back and gives you details that only bold eye-witnesses can give.

Most of the published articles and statements of this frontline veteran of Nigerian politics have been in response to attacks on him, or aimed at provoking debates and, invariably, attacks. The subject has always been Nigerian politics, or Nigerian political history, and his role and those of his associates, and of course, opponents, in it. One of the latest is the two-part article published in *The Guardian* of October 28 and 29, 2003 and titled: "History, Awo and Zik."

In that polemical article, Chief Benson dealt with several events spanning the periods of decolonisation, First Republic and Second Republic. From these I pick out the following: Why Benson joined the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), rather than the Action Group; why and how Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe shifted his political base from Lagos and Western Region to Eastern Region; the personal and political

relationship and differences between Benson and Chief Obafemi Awolowo, and what impacts these had on the politics of Nigeria; the unstable relationship between Azikiwe and Awolowo; why Benson left the NCNC in December 1964; and how he tried, and failed, in 1982, to forge an electoral alliance between the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN), and his party, the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) and, ipso facto, a working agreement between Awolowo and Azikiwe, the leaders of these parties; and, lest I forget, the shifting relationship between traditional rulers in Western Region and succeeding regional governments.

Benson's accounts, even when offered as jokes, go a long way in enriching our knowledge of the past. The points made by him in response to specific attacks go beyond his adversaries and shed light on some important, controversial or obscure events in our chequered history. The historical contexts of Benson's polemical statements and articles are more important than the specific clarifications he makes.

It is these contexts, more than his defence and clarifications, that concern me here. The present piece is however not an attempt to tell the Benson story. The veteran nationalist politician, now 86 years old, can tell his own story, and is in fact telling it, better than anyone else. My aim here is to provide some background information and suggest a context for appreciating the story, and, hopefully, to assist researchers to arrive at more objective conclusions and assessments.

Benson said that he was the first person that Awolowo gave a copy of his book, *The Path to Nigerian Freedom*, "as his friend in London". The book, in which Awolowo advocated, among other things, the structuring of Nigeria along ethno-linguistic lines, was written in 1945. That was shortly after the NCNC was formed in Nigeria (1944), about the time of the first highly successful general strike in Nigeria (1945), about the time obnoxious proposals for major constitutional reforms in colonial Nigeria were being made by the colonial rulers (1945), and at the time Egbe Omo Yoruba was formed. But the book appeared before the formation of the Zikist Movement (1946), before the formation of Action Group (1951), and about a decade after Azikiwe started his pan-Nigeria nationalist journalistic crusade in Nigeria through his chain of newspapers.

It is within this historical context that one should read what Benson had to say about his decision not to join "a tribal party" and his declaration: "The political deference between Awo and I on matter of principle then was that he believed in Yorubaism and I have an uncompromising belief in Nigeria as one united country".

The last pre-independence federal elections which took place in December 1959 produced a federal government controlled by the Northern People's Congress (NPC) and the NCNC, the latter being a junior coalition partner. The NPC controlled the government of the North; the AG that of the West, and the NCNC that of the East.

The Action Group became the official opposition in the Federal House of Representatives, and the party's leader, Chief Awolowo, was named Leader of Opposition in the House. Between the elections and the emergence of the new government, strenuous, but ultimately fruitless, attempts were made to forge a coalition between the NCNC and the Action Group with the aim of producing the federal government and pushing the NPC, which was the largest party in the House, into the opposition. Those members of the NCNC who participated in these efforts were, in their own words, inspired by two needs: the need to forge the unity of the South and the need to ensure the emergence of a "progressive" government which they believed a coalition between the NCNC and Action Group was in a better position to provide. The efforts collapsed because some leaders of the NCNC were militantly against an AG-NCNC alliance, citing the "treachery" of 1951/52 through which the NCNC was denied the control of the Western regional government and Azikiwe the membership of the House of Representatives. I am yet to confirm Benson's role in this particular struggle. The ghost of 1951/52 did not disappear throughout the life times of Awolowo and Azikiwe.

In the middle of 1962, the crisis which had been brewing in the Action Group, the government party in the West, came to the open at the Jos Conference of the party. The party split into two factions with Chief Awolowo leading the radical faction and Chief Ladoke Akintola, to whom Awolowo had relinquished the premiership of the West on his movement to the Federal House of Representatives, leading the

conservative faction. The NPC-NCNC federal government seized the opportunity to “deal” with the Action Group and its leader, Chief Awolowo.

The federal government supported Akintola and ensured that he retained the premiership of the West after a six-month emergency period administered by the federal government. To govern the West, Akintola formed the United Peoples Party (UPP) and went into alliance with the Western wing of the NCNC. Shortly after this, Awolowo and his key supporters - while still in detention imposed by the federal government-appointed administrator of the West - were arrested and charged with treasonable felony and given long prison sentences. In the fourth quarter of 1963, the UPP and several leaders of Western NCNC formed a new party, the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP).

The NCNC then re-grouped in the West, and nationally, and went into alliance with the Action Group. The alliance was called the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA). It became the opposition in the West. Chief TOS Benson, the third national vice-president of the NCNC, remained in the party. He became one of the leaders of UPGA whose key electoral platform was the release of Chief Awolowo and his supporters from prison. By this time electoral politics in Nigeria had become thoroughly ethnicised.

Then came the 1964 federal elections which UPGA hoped to win. Ordinarily, and according to the political practice at the time, Chief Benson was expected to be nominated by his party, the NCNC, to re-contest the Lagos seat he occupied in the House of Representatives. But suddenly, the nation was told that Benson would have to seek re-nomination with one of his campaign secretaries, a man who happened to be of Igbo extraction. Benson refused to go into the nomination exercise. But rather than join the NNDP, as many people expected or feared, he decided to contest the election as an independent candidate. He won, and retained his seat in the House of Representatives. The aftermath of that election is well-known: crisis, military coup d'état, civil war, etc.

Nigeria returned to civil rule on the inauguration of the Second Republic on October 1, 1979. Alhaji Shehu Shagari of the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) was

declared president after beating (as it was officially announced) four other candidates including Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe of the Nigerian Peoples Party (NPP) and Chief Obafemi Awolowo of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). Chief Benson was a leading member of NPP.

After a well-orchestrated attempt to forge an opposition alliance between four parties, including NPP and UPN, the former split off and joined the victorious NPN in a coalition government at the federal level. But less than half way through the government's four-year tenure, the NPN turned on the NPP and forced the latter to quit the federal government. The party then re-joined the UPN, which it had abandoned in the opposition.

History had been repeated! After the 1959 federal election, efforts were made to forge an alliance between the NCNC and AG. The efforts collapsed and the NCNC went into a coalition government with the NPC. When the NPC took on the UPN, the NCNC must have rejoiced. But shortly after, the heat was turned on the NCNC. The latter ran back to the AG to form an alliance, the UPGA. Now, change NPC to NPN, NCNC to NPP, AG to UPN and UPGA to PPA (Progressive Parties Alliance) and you have exactly the same story two decades later. In 1982, as another general election was approaching, Chief Benson and some of his compatriots tried again to bring Azikiwe and Awolowo and their respective parties together to present a "Southern Front". The effort collapsed even before it got off the ground. The ghost of 1951/52 again!