

## **Nigerian history through Awolowo**

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### **I.**

I was not disappointed when I eventually obtained a copy of **AWO: On the trail of a titan: Essays in celebration of the Obafemi Awolowo Centennial**. Since its presentation to the public early in March 2009 I had sought the book because I believed that it would not only answer some lingering questions on the life and career of the late pre-eminent Nigerian leader, but also fill some gaps in my knowledge of Nigeria's political and social history. This fulfilled expectation explains the title of this article.

In general, I have for long held that any collection of essays on aspects of the life and career of any great political leader will be a good introduction to the history of the particular polity. In particular, I have held that any collection of essays on aspects of the life and career of any of these three Nigerian political leaders – Obafemi Awolowo, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Ahmadu Bello – will be a good introduction to the history of modern Nigeria. As I said earlier, I was not disappointed when I opened the pages of the book under reference.

The Awolowo book was edited by David Oke, Olatunji Dare, Adebayo William and Femi Akinola – four prominent Nigerian intellectuals who had previously

researched and written on Chief Awolowo. The first three of the four editors have contributions in the book - with the first appearing twice. There are altogether 17 essays divided into four parts: Part 1: **Obafemi Awolowo as leader** (Chapters 1-7); Part II: **Obafemi Awolowo's legacy for Nigeria** (Chapter 8-11); Part III: **Footprints on the sands of time** (Chapters 12 – 16); and Part IV: **Awolowo in and through history** (Chapter 17). There are, in addition, an opening poem, **For Obafemi Awolowo** (Ten Mays later) composed in 1997 by Niyi Osundare; a Foreword, **A Guru for all time and all places** by Wole Soyinka; a **Founding Philosophy** by Obafemi Awolowo Foundation; and **Acknowledgements** by Olatokunbo Awolowo – Dosunmu.

These four introductory entries take up 24 pages, bringing the total volume of the book to about 370 pages. Awolowo – Dosunmu categorized the contributors to the book as follows: "Professor Wole Soyinka, Noble Laureate, who was asked to write the **Foreword**; two other Nigerian National Order of Merit Laureates; distinguished veterans of the struggle for Nigeria's development, particularly those who had worked closely with Papa; rising stars with the enthusiasm to make a difference in their generation; and a friend who identifies so passionately with Nigeria that he has practically become one of us". You will be able to place each contributor in his category as you read his essay.

I think I should list the 17 chapters of the book. Chapter 1: **Obafemi Awolowo: politician, prophet, philosopher and patriot** by Akinjide Osuntokun; Chapter 2: **The essence of the Awolowo phenomenon** by Itse Sagay; Chapter 3: **The quintessential Awo** by Wole Adebaniwi; Chapter 4: **Obafemi Awolowo and the golden era of the Yoruba** by Segun Gbadegesin; Chapter 5: **Awo as a humanist** by Sam Aluko; Chapter 6: **Remembering Awo: Reminiscences** by Mvendaga Jibo; Chapter 7: **Obafemi Awolowo: Reflection of a native son** by Richard Joseph; Chapter 8: **Fundamental essentials of the Awolowo heritage** by Banji Akintoye; Chapter 9: **Obafemi Awolowo's development legacy** by David Oke; and Chapter 10; **Resuscitating Awo's development legacy**, also by David Oke.

Chapter 11 carries the essay: **Awo and the opticom idea** by Akin Mabogunje; Chapter 12: **Awoism, the Awoist and Awology**, by Francis Ogunmodede; Chapter 13: **Rebuilding the Nigerian educational system for the 21st Century**, by Anya O. Anya; Chapter 14: **Awo on minorities and revenue allocation**, by Obaro Ikime; Chapter 15: **Awolowo and culture** by Ropo Sekoni; Chapter 16: **In the fraternity of the pen: Obafemi Awolowo as a journalist** by Olatunji Dare; and Chapter 17. **The titan and the titanic**, by Adebayo Williams. Ending the book is an 11-page Corporate Profile of Odu'a Investment Company Limited, titled **Welcome to the Awolowo economic development legacy**.

We are thus presented with 18 essays, if we include Wole Soyinka's strongly-worded **Foreword**. In this first series of review-articles we shall look at some of the essays more closely - starting naturally with the **Foreword**. The other essays in this very important work will be appreciated in a future series.

Wole Soyinka introduced the subject – Chief Obafemi Awolowo – in the strongest terms possible: “This individual (meaning Obafemi Awolowo) was not only ahead of his time, he was ahead of his environment, and light-years ahead of his peers. A social philosopher, he was not content merely to see ahead, but to prescribe confidently ahead. The loss, not only to Nigeria, but indeed to the African continent, is immeasurable”. To assist the readers appreciate Soyinka's assessment here we may remind them that Awolowo's “time” can be taken to be from his formation of Egbe Omo Oduduwa (1945) or the publication of his first book **Path to Nigerian Freedom** (1947) to his death in May 1987. And among his peers were Nnamdi Azikiwe and Ahmadu Bello.

Soyinka had earlier wondered why the works of Awolowo, cited by various contributors to the book under appreciation did not make him a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Economics and how the “Forum of Federations, based in Canada, could have failed to induct such a mind into their Governing Council”, and indeed why “a number of those works are not textbooks in the highest institutions of learning”. I can as well say at this point that I share Wole Soyinka's assessment having now re-read Awolowo's **Path to Nigerian Freedom** (1947); **The autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo** (1960); **Thoughts on the Nigerian Constitution** (1966);

**The People's Republic** (1968); **The Strategy and Tactics of the People's Republic of Nigeria** (1970); and **The problems of Africa: The need for ideological reappraisal** (1977).

On the question of ideological affiliation, Soyinka testifies that "Awolowo was not a dyed-in-the-wood absolutist of any contending ideologies. If anything, his ideological leaning may be summed up as one of welfarist capitalism, based however, on socialist humanism". Rigidity in ideological precept, he says, "was one constriction in prescriptive thought that Awolowo vigorously avoided: Awo's book. **Strategy and Tactics of the people's Republic** "remains applicable to more than just one developing nation, or the over-developed." For an assessment of Soyinka's opinion on this matter I would refer the reader to the concluding installment of the series of lectures which Awolowo delivered in Ghana in 1976 under the general theme **Problems of Africa: The need for ideological re-appraisal**. Awolowo's endorsement of socialism was unambiguous-even as late in his life as 1976.

Describing Obafemi Awolowo as a "passionate democrat and humanist by instinct", Soyinka regrets that he (Awolowo) "underwent the irony of a trial for treasonable felony, accused of attempting to overthrow, by violent means, a 'democratically elected government'". Soyinka refers to those who testified against Awolowo as "witnesses of untruths and distortions". This may well be true. But the deeper implication here is that Awolowo did not commit the offence for which he and a number of his followers were tried and jailed in 1963. That was one of the critical questions whose answers I had sought in the anthology.

Having now got my answer, I would simply re-state my view: The post-independence Federal Government run by the Northern People's Congress (NPC) and National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) deserved to be overthrown by truly nationalist and revolutionary forces. But I sincerely regret the tragic and senseless murders and liquidations which accompanied the majors' coup of January 1966. As to whether plans were made by the Action Group leadership to overthrow the Federal Government in 1962 - a question which Soyinka has answered in the negative - you may also need to read the testimony of Samuel Ikoku in **Samuel Ikoku Inside Out**:

**An authorised biography of an African statesman** (1997), written by Kelvin Oji and Victor Efifik.

Finally, Soyinka says: "Awolowo, easily the most disciplined leader, after Mahatma Gandhi, that the world of national liberation and humane politics has ever known, was easily the most prolific – and that brooks no exception.... We are constantly faced with an original mind, intellectually disciplined, resolute on principles yet pragmatic in the pursuit of political goals". I endorse this general assessment except to say that Awolowo was also sometimes rigid, rather than pragmatic, "in the pursuit of political goals". Apart from Mvendaga Jibo's opinion which we cite later on in this appreciation I would relate my personal experience.

In December 1978, or thereabout, Chief Awolowo came to Calabar on his Presidential campaign tour. With the agency of Odia Ofeimun, his Private Secretary, I met the Presidential candidate of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) as he was taking his dinner (of bread and Lucozade, if I remember correctly) about 1.00am. After the pleasantries, I told Chief Awolowo that I liked UPN's four cardinal programmes and would like to campaign for him but would not like to be a card-carrying member of the party. After appreciating my choice Chief Awolowo insisted that I should formally join the party. He also politely turned down the request that a particular "newbreed" politician – much more popular than the "old-breed" Awolowo loyalist- be adopted as UPN candidate for the governorship contest in the then Cross River State.

In the event I campaigned for Awolowo and for UPN in 1979 and 1983 without Awo's permission, and without joining the party.

## **II.**

This is the second part of the first series of my review of the book **AWO: On the trail of a titan -Essays in celebration of the Obafemi Awolowo Centennial.**

Akinjide Osuntokun's essay, **Obafemi Awolowo: politician, patriot and philosopher**, is an abridged biography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo (1909 – 1987).

Awolowo was born on March 6, 1909 in Ikenne in the present Ogun State. He was educated at Ikenne, Abeokuta and Ibadan. He trained as a teacher. He later left teaching and went into journalism, business and trade unionism. In 1944, Awolowo earned, by correspondence, the degree of Bachelor of Commerce from the University of London. Thereafter he went to England to read law, and was called to the English Bar in 1946. While in England, he formed a Yoruba cultural organization, **Egbe Omo Oduduwa** in 1945. It was in the same year that he wrote his famous book, **Path to Nigerian Freedom**.

It was in this book, **Path to Nigerian Freedom**, that Chief Obafemi Awolowo made his famous declaration that Nigeria was a "mere geographical expression", by which he meant that "there were no Nigerians as there were French or Germans". Nigeria was not a nation in the European sense of a nation-state, Awolowo insisted. He therefore advocated a federal system of government for Nigeria. According to Osuntokun: "Many, particularly future rival politicians, were to use his exposition as evidence that Awolowo was never a nationalist but a Yoruba patriot. In retort, Awolowo always said one could not be a good Nigerian if he was not a good Yoruba, Igbo or Hausa first".

This was one of Chief Awolowo's rigidly held beliefs and refrains throughout his life. While appreciating this belief I would like to ask if one could be a good Yoruba, Igbo or Hausa without being a good Nigerian. Or put differently, whether being a good Yoruba, or Igbo or Hausa is a necessary, as well as sufficient-condition for being a good Nigerian.

Chief Awolowo, according to Osuntokun, advocated fiscal federalism, "that is to say, each part of Nigeria should keep the bulk of its revenue while contributing to maintain common services at the centre". The Action Group (AG) was formed in 1950. Awolowo was the Premier of Western Region from 1952 to 1959 when he yielded the position to his deputy, Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola. Awolowo became Leader of Opposition in the Federal House of Representation in Lagos. In 1963 he was arrested, tried and jailed for treasonable felony. He was released in August 1966 and a year later was appointed Vice-Chairman of Federal Executive Council and Federal Commissioner for Finance in the military government of General Yakubu Gowon.

Chief Awolowo resigned from the military government after the Civil War (1967 – 1970) and went back to law practice. He ran for the Presidency of the country in 1979 on the platform of the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN). He lost the election. He ran again in 1983, and lost again. When the military staged another coup d'état in December 1983 Awolowo retired to private life. He died in his home town, Ikenne, on May 9, 1987 at the age of 78.

Itse Sagay opens his essay, **The Essence of the Awolowo phenomenon** with the statement: "When I heard of the passing away of Chief Obafemi Awolowo on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 1987, I was shocked, taken aback; and for a short while, I was in a state of denial. When the reality of the event finally sank in, I realized that subconsciously, I did not associate Chief Awolowo with the possibility of death. And the reason was that, he had so overcome and subdued the physical (mortal) aspect of his being by the spiritual, that over the years, I began to regard him more as a spirit, than a mortal man. As we know, the spirit does not die".

The next paragraph further explores this theme: "For me, the life of Awolowo epitomized the supremacy of the spirit over the body." Itse Sagay then provides four illustrations of "Awolowo's cultivation of the spirit as well as his own mastery over the body". The four are taken from Awolowo's travails between 1960 and 1966, including his trial and imprisonment. When I reflected on this passage, especially the fact that "everything he said in that post-judgment speech came to pass", I was myself tempted to see Awolowo as a spirit or at least a mysterious being.

In subsequent sections of his essay, Itse Sagay deals with **Awolowo: the man of principle; The nature of Awo's appeal to admirers; Awolowo's political culture;** and **Awolowo as a scholar and intellectual.** On the second attribute, he says: "With the Action Group's record of organization, and planning, it is no surprise that the Awolowo government of Western Region was the first to introduce free education, free health services, and a guaranteed minimum wage in the country. It is also no surprise that the first television broadcasting system and the first modern sports stadium were established by the Awolowo government".

Itse Sagay also remembers: "When the Action Group lost the 1959 federal elections, the party did the next best thing. It decided to form an effective opposition with Chief Awolowo as Leader of Opposition. Again, shadow ministers were appointed. So knowledgeable and effective were these shadow ministers that the Abubakar government felt threatened. This was partly responsible for the deliberate destabilization of the Action Group and the instigation of the splinter group under Chief Akintola, followed by the crisis, detentions, treason trials and the fall of the First Republic." I, myself, still ponder this coincidence: Awolowo's refusal not to legally challenge Alhaji Shehu Shagari's re-election as President in September 1983 was followed by the overthrow of the Second Republic in December 1983 just as his imprisonment in 1963 was followed, through a chain of tragic events, by the collapse of the First Republic in January 1966.

**On Awolowo as a scholar and intellectual**, Itse Sagay says: "Finally, Awolowo was a great political thinker and philosopher. His thoughts and writings on federalism, starting from the early forties, have not only remained valid up till today, they have become even more valid with the passage of time". Sagay then proceeds to cite copiously from two of Awolowo's well-researched books, **Path to Nigerian Freedom** (1947) and **Thoughts on Nigerian Constitution** (1966) to show that Awolowo believed in a federal constitution for Nigeria and that this belief was neither sentimental, nor subjective, nor arbitrary, but issued from his findings after an empirical study of the workings of the constitutions of "virtually all the countries of the world". Awo's books clearly testify to this.

It is often alleged by Chief Obafemi Awolowo's opponents that the Action Group (AG) became the governing party through the Western Regional parliamentary election of 1951 by "buying over" some members of the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) who had won the election on the platform of their party. Itse Sagay refuted the charge. Although Sagay's refutation is convincing you may also need to read Kolawole Balogun's contrary account in his book, **My country Nigeria** (1971).

In the concluding section of his essay, **Remembering Awo: Reminiscences**, Mvendaga Jibo summarised his answer to a question which I may phrase as follows:



Why did Obafemi Awolowo and his Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) lose the mass electoral support which the First Republic Action Group had enjoyed in the minority nationalities? According to Jibo: "But Awo had a rigid approach to life, which is a big setback in the politics of a multi-ethnic state. Whereas the Yoruba almost worshipped him for the great contributions he made to their collective well being, other ethnic groups had their own local champions. He should have cultivated these as his 'gateways' into those communities. He should have appreciated the fact that 'all politics is local!'. Because of his rigid approach, once one's perception of politics differed from his, he found it difficult to accommodate the difference".

We may compare this opinion with the one offered by Richard Joseph in his own essay: **Obafemi Awolowo: Reflections of a native son:** "Despite the popular enthusiasm and extensive media coverage generated by his call for free education, rural development, full employment, and free health care, the greatest number of Awolowo's supporters as well as of his opponents, voted on the basis of who he was (in ethnic terms) rather than the ideology of himself and his party. The clear lesson of the 1979 election is that individuals who have become identified as the foremost champions of their people's interests-whether or not such an image has been intentionally sought - cannot expect to win power when the whole nation is considered as a single constituency. In such cases, they can be said to be ultimately trapped by the ethnic perceptions of their supporters and opponents...".

These are powerful insights which should be of help to serious students of Nigeria's political history and what I may call the "Awolowo phenomenon". In my view these insights do not, in the least, diminish Awo's giant status. But, then one may ask whether the elections which Awolowo contested and lost were free and fair (that is, whether – or to what extent – the federal elections of 1959, 1979 and 1983 by which Awolowo's acceptability as a national leader were formally and constitutionally assessed were free, fair and credible). This is a mild question on the brilliant analyses of Jibo and Joseph.

### III.

This is the third and concluding part of my review of the book, **Awo: On the trail of a titan - Essays in the celebration of the Obafemi Awolowo Centennial**.

Obaro Ikime wrote on **Awolowo's position on minorities and revenue allocation**. He quoted two passages from Chief Obafemi Awolowo's second book, **Awo: The autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo (1960)**: "... I am strongly of the opinion that by failing to create the three proposed states before independence (that is, one each from the Western minorities, Eastern minorities and Northern minorities), we have omitted to do the only thing that would have given the minority ethnic groups a feeling of security in a new and free Nigeria". And then: "It is my unshaken belief that Nigeria's feet would have been firmly and unswervingly set on the road to liberal democracy if the three proposed states had been created by Britain before she surrenders power over to Nigeria on October 1, 1960". This shows that Awolowo linked federalism in a multiethnic polity with (liberal) democracy. That makes his advocacy of federalism deeper and more robust.

In his conclusion, Ikime said, and I agree completely: "What emerges from our discussion of Awolowo's attitude to the minority ethnic groups in Nigeria and the issue of revenue allocation? We see a man who took the trouble to arm himself with the facts and figures based on wide reading. We see a man who, once convinced about an issue, gave it his all. We see a leader who was a democrat, but who was not afraid to canvas his personal point of view based on his conviction. We see an indefatigable worker, committed to give of his best to his people and his nation. Obafemi Awolowo, whatever his foibles, must be reckoned among the best leaders that Nigeria has produced so far." Finally, Ikime made the vital point: "Would realpolitik have changed Awolowo's attitude (on state creation and revenue allocation) if he were alive today? I am a historian and the "ifs" of history are always dangerous grounds to tread. Besides, each person must be judged in the context of the age in which he or she lived." Again, I endorse this thesis completely.

Perhaps, because Sam A. Aluko is not a historian by formal training he was freer to venture into the "ifs" of history which Ikime, a trained historian, tried to avoid. In the closing passages of his own essay, **Awolowo as a humanist**, Aluko declared, and I have a strong urge to agree: "If Awo were alive today, he would neither subscribe to, nor support, the on-going privatization, deregulation, downsizing and retrenchment of workers and the withdrawal of Nigerian governments from the business of the people. He would not support the abandonment of the Nigerians to the greed, exploitation and irresponsiveness of the private sector. Rather, Nigerians would have found him in the vanguard, using the powers of the government to lead the development of the Nigerian economy and the promotion of the Nigerian economy and the promotion of the welfare of the people".

I think I should give personal thanks to Olatunji Dare, my friend and former colleague at **The Guardian** for his essay, **The fraternity of the pen: Obafemi Awolowo as a journalist**. Why? Because either I did not know, or had completely forgotten, that Chief Obafemi Awolowo was a journalist. And yet, as Dare now brings to our knowledge, Awolowo wrote for at least two newspapers, the **Daily Telegraph** and **Daily Service** and two journals, **West Africa** and **West African Review!** I had, while working with Dare, written an unpublished essay, **The press and radical politics in Nigeria**, in which I only mentioned Chief Awolowo as publisher of the **Nigerian Tribune**. But as Dare now shows in his essay, Awolowo was a journalist, a publisher and a "theorist of the press."

As a "theorist of the press", Awolowo enunciated "five attributes (which) the press must possess if it was to serve as a guardian of democracy". They are: the cultivation of the "habit of accuracy"; being "grounded on sound knowledge without which the media could not instruct or command respect and esteem"; upholding the "principle of "constructiveness" – for "demolishing what others have done or proposed is the easiest thing in the world, whereas the way to promote democracy was to be constructive"; being courageous; and being impartial, where impartiality means the "habit of applying the same standard to all parties in the news". Olatunji Dare calls these attributes five "journalistic imperatives". Well, Awolowo's loaded imperatives,

as rendered by Dare, provide "food for thought" and do not call for a response of "I agree" or "I don't agree".

Adebayo Williams wrote the last essay, **The titan and the titanic: Awolowo in and through history**. The placement of the essay was a brilliant editorial decision- for, in addition to his own powerful statement on Awolowo, Williams also attempts a summary of the main theses of the preceding essays. But I would like to play one or two passages back to the author and ask if he had been sufficiently sensitive, in his choice of language, to the feelings of some ethnic nationalities and those who view militant nationalism in Nigeria with much reverence.

**Adebayo Williams** writes: "In a famous obituary of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, **The Times** of London described him as an accomplished administrator who could have easily been a great prime minister of Britain (1987). Does it then mean that Awolowo was far ahead of his time and therefore fair game for his Lilliputian contemporaries?" I ask: Why the expression "Lilliputian contemporaries"? What names readily come to mind when we speak of Awolowo's contemporaries?

At another point **Adebayo Williams** says: "Even more ominous was the fact that Awolowo's old **bete noire**, the formidable Nnamdi Azikiwe, was dredged up as a presidential candidate of a rival party. Although Zik's old Mercedes car broke down constantly during the hectic campaigns – a frightfully symbolic development – his mere presence on the political hustlings achieved what it was designed to achieve, which was to isolate and quarantine Awo to his Yoruba stronghold"

Why the expression "Dredged up"! Is it not possible to find a less offensive, but equally effective, expression? Furthermore, how strongly can we argue the case that Azikiwe was "dredged up" as a design "to isolate and quarantine Awo to his Yoruba stronghold" and not to battle to make him (Azikiwe) President?

For the avoidance of doubt, as Awolowo would say, I have no problem with the main thrust of Adebayo Williams' strong defense of Chief Obafemi Awolowo. His essay was a brilliant citation on a man that is correctly called "the sage". All I quarrel with is his use of language in some (not all) of the places where he had to compare Awolowo with his "contemporaries" - among whom, as we know, are Nnamdi Azikiwe

and Ahmadu Bello. He could make his point without **unnecessarily** alienating, and doing violence to the feelings of many compatriots – dead and alive – to whom Azikiwe and Ahmadu Bello are icons.

Wale Adebani, in his contribution, **The quintessential Awo**, writes: "It was the combination of practical vision and a quality of mind that accomplished purposes (where there was the opportunity to be in charge), and to set out how (where the opportunity to be in charge was lacking) through a deliberately designed programme, that marked Awo out and put him above his peers, so much so that in a hundred years hence, you can still engage with Awo's ideas, where you can only support or oppose Bello's politics and only admire Zik's contribution to Nigeria's freedom." Quite controversial, but I agree completely.

Adebani also recalls Odi Ofeimun's thesis that "... specific to Awolowo, the force and clarity of his ideas and his administrative proficiency with which he pursued them whenever he had an opportunity to exercise governmental power, made him shine above his colleagues. Awolowo covered all the critical questions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Nigeria) in an outstanding manner: the struggle to transform Nigeria from what he once called 'a mere geographical expression' into a cultural expression, a federation; the choice of an ideology for the nation; the campaign for secularity; the problem of lifting a backward majority from the tyranny of poverty and ignorance; and the bubbling of democracy, press freedom and the rule of law". Strong and correct, but inoffensive! Even more "audacious", but again inoffensive, is Odi Ofeimun's statement, also quoted by Adebani, that Awolowo "was the only Nigerian politician in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who could dare anyone to contradict him on his claim that he never made a promise in his public career that he failed to fulfill".

Let me conclude with a rather sensitive subject. Chief Obafemi Awolowo "belongs" to all of us who are committed to "saving" Nigeria and transforming it into a type of nation that has been implicitly and explicitly described in this book. Let us not fall into the trap set by those who claim that Awo was a tribal leader. He was not. In like manner, let us not fall into the trap set by those who allege that "June 12" is, or has become, an "ethnic affair". It is not, and should not be made to appear like one.

