

'OBAFEMI AWOLowo FOUNDATION: MOVING THE LEGACY FORWARD'

1947

'In my own humble opinion, education is that process of physical and mental culture whereby a man's personality is developed to the fullest'.

(Awo: 'Education as a Means to National Freedom)

1948

'Everyone has the right to education... Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.'

(Article 26, UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

From its public inauguration in 1951, the Action Group, the vehicle that carried AWO into political office, summarised its basic principles in the famous motto, 'Freedom for All, Life More Abundant'.

In this regard, four freedoms were enunciated, one of them, 'freedom from ignorance', was further elaborated as 'the education of all children of school-going age, and the general enlightenment of all illiterate adults and all children above school-going age'. This was 50 years before the Millennium Development Goals of the UN came into being.

In setting out the party's principles and goals, AWO adjured, '...we must make sure...that our principles are just and that our methods are practical'. All the same, on assumption of office, AWO and his team were keenly aware that, 'apart from administrative impediments....there were also financial hurdles of a mountainous height to be overcome'. Determined to prove the stuff of which they were made, however, they made up their minds to 'compel the force of any adverse circumstance to serve (their) will'. The rest, as they say, is history.

In pursuance of the fulfillment of their promises to the electorate in the area of education, an unprecedented award of 200 post-secondary scholarships tenable in British and American Universities, as well as the then University College, Ibadan was made by the Action Group government as the first indication of their absolute commitment to their pledge. It is, no doubt, testamentary, not only to this epoch-making achievement of the government, but also to the transparency of the selection process at the time, that most of the beneficiaries of the scholarship scheme turned out to be arguably the most accomplished Nigerians of their generation.

Not only did the subsequent Free Education scheme succeed brilliantly, it became a perpetual, compelling point of comparison between the Western Region government's delivery of benefits to its citizens and that of its counterparts in other regions. Unfortunately, however, AWO's hopes of extending the scheme nationwide, to make 'technical and professional education ... generally available and higher education ... equally accessible to all on the basis of merit', in line with both his own persistent advocacy and the UN Declaration of Human Rights, was never realised.

Today, prevailing evidence in the education sector at all levels in Nigeria compels us to ask the question, 'What has become of the vision of education as a tool of individual and national development, 55 years on?'

According to AWO, 'a man whose personality is developed never fears anything; he cringes not, and never feels inferior to anyone...; he is self-reliant, and will resist any form of enslavement... He may be an employee or servant, but he is a self-confident and courageous servant who does his work with efficiency and probity, but with no thought of servitude. His breadth of mind enables him to exercise his freedom in such a manner as not to endanger the interests and freedom of others. He is a citizen of the world – free from narrow prejudices'.

The above quote presents us with considerable food for thought and it is our hope that, beyond the usual lamentations of missed or wasted opportunities, this Conference will proffer policy and practical options for the way forward in the Nigerian educational sector, bearing in mind the enduring truism of Winston Churchill's words that 'the future belongs to the educated races'. The situation becomes even more urgent for us as we attempt to find our place in a globalised world where opportunities abound for our brightest and best beyond our shores and our reality today is of severe, virtually irreversible brain drain. It is our fervent hope that our generation can and will redeem its unfortunate role in the progressive abandonment of a precious legacy.

One of the reasons why the Obafemi Awolowo Foundation, the custodian of Chief Awolowo's intellectual legacy, organised this year-long series of events in celebration of AWO's centenary was to find out whether his goals for development are of enduring relevance and if they are, to proffer contemporary strategies, where necessary, for their implementation. Judging from the outcome of the various events, there appears to be no doubt, whatsoever, about the enduring relevance of AWO's ideas. The challenge appears, however, to remain that of moving the legacy forward in a non-partisan, universally acceptable manner.

The centenary programme was flagged off with the presentation of the Foundation's compilation of scholarly essays and centenary publication, 'AWO: On the Trail of a Titan' in January 2009; then followed the epochal Centenary lectures in March by Professor Wole Soyinka, Nobel Laureate and Mr. Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General and Nobel Laureate; these were followed by the Special Dialogue in July organised in collaboration with the Obafemi Awolowo University and titled, 'The Awolowo Legacy & the Youth'; followed by the launch in October in London of a publication by Insa Nolte, in collaboration with the International African Institute of the School of Oriental & African Studies and the Edinburgh University Press titled, 'Obafemi Awolowo and the Making of Remo: The Local Politics of a Nigerian Nationalist'; then, also in October, the symposium held in Ibadan in celebration of '50 Years of Television in Africa'. Every event in the celebrations was outstandingly successful.

At this Conference, two events are billed to take place of which we at the Foundation feel justifiably proud. The first is the inauguration, this morning, of the Foundation's Professorial Research Endowment in four Nigerian universities, namely, Ahmadu Bello University (Social Sciences), Obafemi Awolowo University (Jurisprudence),

University of Ibadan (Economics) and University of Nigeria, Nsukka (Applied Science).

The second event, scheduled for tomorrow morning, is the public presentation of another centenary publication titled, 'AWO the Builder (The Story of Papa Obafemi Awolowo)', which was commissioned by the Foundation as a version of AWO's biography written specifically for children within the 9 to 13-year-old bracket. The author is none other than Chief 'Wunmi Adegbonmire, a highly respected and committed patriot. Our hope is that the story will not only inspire young Nigerians to reach for greater heights of personal accomplishment, but also re-orientate their value system to one which accords proper recognition to ennobling values such as integrity, excellence and service just as much as, if not more than, it appears, society currently does to the size of material possessions.

Through both of the above-stated initiatives we continue to strive to live up to our credo of 'generating ideas for national development'.

I would like to seize this opportunity to acknowledge the immeasurable support and remarkable organisational ability of the organisers of each event in the year-long centenary celebrations. Our gratitude to them and to all the individuals, governments and corporate bodies who have assisted us financially is beyond measure. We are, nonetheless, modest enough to acknowledge that all of this goodwill came our way because of the illustrious name that we bear. I have said this before, but it bears repeating – we shall continue to bear the name with pride; and we pledge to continue to strive to approximate Chief Awolowo's legacy of commitment, integrity and excellence in service and to do our best to ensure that his legacies continue to endure.

I must, finally, thank the members of the Organising Committee of this 'grand finale' – a fitting tribute to Chief Awolowo's lifelong advocacy for free universal education as the cornerstone of Nigeria's development. The Committee is an all-female 'star cast'. It has been a delight working with such an accomplished group and, as is typical with such formidable women, ideas have flowed freely and action has followed swiftly and purposefully. Papa would have been proud of you all.

Above all, I am grateful to everyone who has contributed to the success of these centenary celebrations, not least for their unquestioning acceptance of, and total support for my 'audacity' to claim a role in the process of moving my father's legacy forward. I am immensely grateful to you all.

I cannot end this statement without a special word of thanks to Mama, Yeye Oodu'a H. I.D. Awolowo, Founding Member of the Foundation and His Imperial Majesty, Oba Okunade Sijuwade, Olubuse II, the Ooni of Ife, the Foundation's Grand Patron, for their unalloyed support and encouragement throughout this process.

Finally, I thank the Almighty for His faithfulness.

Dr Olatokunbo Awolowo Dosumu
Founding Member
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