

Power Politics or Welfare Politics?
Chief Obafemi Awolowo
in the History of African Nationalist Political Thought

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Introduction

As to be expected, this lecture discusses Nigeria's contemporary challenges and predicaments, but I would like to be more in keeping with the passion of the great statesman himself: the preeminent politician, Chief Obafemi Awolowo (1909-1987), who was, in his lifetime, inevitably consumed by similar challenges and predicaments as well as the crushing power of negative forces and opposition. However, he met these challenges with a tenacity and passion. He survived the struggles of early life, worked hard as a young man, and used his talents and skills for the development of a greater number. Similarly, the contributions of Chief Obafemi Awolowo to the development of Nigeria cannot be overstated in this or any lecture devoted to his enduring legacy. His contributions were monumental, enduring, and still visible today.

I will locate Chief Awolowo within a broader framework of African intellectual history since the nineteenth century. No one has put Awolowo in such a larger, global, continental context before, to explore his legacy as part of continental intellectual movements and growth and of cultural-religious history, and within the generalities and specificities of Nigerian/Yoruba history and politics. He was part of two forces: those of colonial and post-colonial African emerging political thought and those of Nigerian nationalism. Placing Awolowo within this larger context enables us to appreciate the bigger picture, to understand the dreams of a pioneer generation: dreams that have been stalled by the values of our milieu imposed on us by a class of the most corrupt politicians who have been the burden of our history to endure.

The current mood has been conditioned to respond to a reality and an epistemology created for us by those in power: a confrontation with mismanagement and the corrosive power of corruption. Current discursive strategies and paradigms tend to be confrontational or aggressive, but this is inevitable when the people tend to think that development and progress elude them. In recent times, so distrustful and alienated are so many people that they no longer trust their governments and regard the words of their political leaders as empty and morally offensive. But our past, the one represented by Chief Awolowo, and a vibrant intellectual generation, was full of greater promises. By highlighting the success of Awolowo, we celebrate African genius as well as demonstrate that scholarship has been deliberately constructed to serve the true needs of the state and the nation.

Writing on the eve of Nigeria's independence, and as part of the intellectual bedrock to policies, Chief Awolowo clearly defined the objectives that Nigeria should pursue, an injunction that merits repeating even today: "As we enter into independence, the thought that must be uppermost in many Nigerian minds is how best to organize and administer the affairs of our

country and to cultivate the goodwill and friendship of our neighbours, for the welfare and happiness of our people, and the general good of mankind... In determining what our defence and foreign policies should be, we must first of all settle in our minds which of two types of politics we prefer: power politics or welfare politics.” Chief Awolowo chose “welfare politics,” and his entire career was based on the pursuit of this vision. Welfare politics, he argued, would generate patriotism and loyalty to the state in a way that would keep Nigeria stable, orderly, and peaceful.

Intellectual Paradigm, Tradition, and the Foundation of a Leader

Western education in Africa created the new elite, invested them with power, and made them the most important participant in the modernizing sectors of society. The governments of post-independence Africa expanded facilities, created new schools at all levels, devoted considerable budgets to education, created opportunities to train girls and women, and promoted African languages and literatures. Education became an important part of national politics. I have started with the context of Western education because it explains much about Chief Awolowo and his most important legacy: the rapid spread of Western education.

Chief Awolowo’s journey began when his parents wanted him to go to school, an education that came with Spartan discipline at the slightest of mistake. This included his struggle to navigate the social realities tied to being in an environment filled with youth. However, the social struggle he experienced during this time allowed him to shape his understandings of the world. This statement that “any position, status or preferment that comes only by mere patronage or favouritism has never since interested me” strikes at the very core of his work ethic that developed as a result: rugged individualism that disregards ascriptive rights. For that spirit of individualism to work, education became a key, and the conversion of that knowledge to skill sets could bring rewards and satisfaction.

Along the way, he acquired the values of defiance, toughness, fearlessness, and truth. He acquired both secular and religious training, and he benefitted from the rich legacy of missionary education. In 1926, he spent a year at Wesley College, the famous teacher training school at Ibadan. Wesley not only imparted academic knowledge but respect for legitimate labour and humility. He also imbibed strong habits of discipline in terms of consumption, hard work, and resoluteness. When his cocoa business collapsed in 1939, he entered in his diary of March 7, 1939, a poetic chemistry of hope, even in downfall:

After rain comes sunshine;
after darkness comes the glorious dawn.
There is no sorrow without its alloy of
joy, there is no joy without its admixture
of sorrow. Behind the ugly terrible mask
of Misfortune lies the beautiful soothing
countenance of Prosperity. So, tear the mask!

The juxtapositions of darkness and light, joy and sorrow, pain and gain run through his philosophy, and he takes as an article of faith that the end of pain and travail is glory.

After receiving his Western education, he became part of a small minority of the highly educated Africans in a colonial state. But this elite was so powerful and so successful that its members eventually inherited power from Europeans and generated ideas about their country. In the case of Chief Awolowo, he invested in the notion of progress—the genuine hope that Nigeria would develop and that he and others would be the agents of that transformation. The notion of progress was intermeshed with that of nationalism. He accepted the ideas of the nation-state but, at the same time, he had his own ideas about ethnicity and even the larger project of a continental identity for Africa. He participated in local and global cultures; his perspectives were drawn from local, national, continental, and international current of ideas. Europeans at first resented him, but he later acquired power from them. Western education supplied new knowledge, globalized knowledge, but the African elite it produced belonged to a society with its own intellectual paradigm.

However, this paradigm developed alongside discussions of tradition and modernity. Modernity includes the notion of change—in practices and ideas that are new, from technology to consumption. It also connotes newness, an intergenerational or intercultural marker between a past and a present. To those with access to objects and ideas associated with modernity—and who flaunt them as worth having—it also connotes prestige. Chief Awolowo can be identified with some of these assumptions of modernity and the identity that resulted. He and others also belonged to an emerging set of new identities defined in solidifying ethnic terms, but, at the same time, they had to engage in struggles to defend the nation and compete for power. Awolowo saw firsthand shifting identities, which he described in his early years living at Ikenne and Abeokuta and in his experiences at Ibadan and Lagos. A new set of Yoruba elite emerged: educated, semi-educated, school teachers, lawyers, and the like set new aspirations. Identities also changed rapidly. Elements of it overlapped, and we see how Awolowo started as an Ikenne boy, growing up among the Egba, acquiring education, broadening his educational base, engaging in the modern occupations of teaching, typing, public letter writing, and later commerce, law and politics.

He also belonged to an extended lineage, township, and culture. When in 1945 he became part of the leading founders of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, his Yoruba identity became a form of political instrumentality. His Ikenne roots grew out of Ijebu-Yoruba identity: Then he became Ijegba, an identity that grew out of living in Abeokuta. The formation of Egbe Omo Oduduwa grew out of colonial control and the rising politics of decolonisation. For Awolowo and other Africans of the colonial era, their identities were not only multifaceted but often thrown into crises and flux. The Ikenne boy became a Yoruba man and a Nigerian politician. He engaged in local politics, competed at the provincial level, became a regional leader, and aspired to national leadership. To all these, add the profession of teaching and law.

In all these identities, the most definitive in Awolowo's life and career was that of his Yoruba-ness, that is, of an ethnicity framed by the colonialists as "tribe." The politics of British

indirect rule ensured that these “tribes” would consolidate, and they later engaged in bitter political competition that led to the Nigerian civil war in the 1960s. As to be expected, the political leaders of the time regarded their actions in plural ways—as nationalists fighting for Nigeria but also as regionalists advancing the progress of their own people. In describing his entry to politics through the Nigerian Youth Movement established in 1934, Chief Awolowo described his work for the party as selfless, and regarded the Nigerian Youth Movement as a nationalist organisation. It should be noted in passing that Lagos was the preeminent centre in the early years of nationalist politics. Chief Awolowo blamed the injection of ethnic nationalism into Lagos politics as the cause of the collapse of an emerging and unifying organisation.

Chief Awolowo regarded his own search for an appropriate federal system and the creation of more states along linguistic lines as paths toward a peaceful and progressive country. Even his ideas on the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, which his political opponents saw as “tribal,” he took on as a platform “to ensure a strong and harmonious federal union among the peoples of Nigeria.” This platform, which others regarded as “tribal,” was actually in conformity with his principles of state creation and federalism and with what was to happen much later with the creation of thirty-six states.

Chief Awolowo in Focus: His Doctrine for Nigeria

Chief Awolowo was primarily concerned with how to bring progress to Nigeria, to free it from European domination and exploitation, to restore its dignity, and to question all negative assumptions and racist prejudices. He did not make distinctions between scholarship and politics, academy and ideology. What we may call scholarly paper, he conceived as a document of economic and political liberation. His motive was to attain development. He created a body of ideas on progress, conscious of the need to respond to negative comments about his people and country. The major ideas they espoused addressed issues of Western domination, imperialism, exploitation, African personality, identity, and alternatives for Africa.

Chief Awolowo belonged to the nationalist phase of African history and the forest of ideas that they all generated, although he did not agree with some of them. He made his own distinctive mark in various ways: intellectual ideas, community organizing, political mobilisation, and leadership. First and foremost, he has to be understood as an intellectual, one who was able to reflect on a large body of data and then able to create policy actions from the conclusions. He was intellectually restless, in the sense that the ideas and policies were many and often came in a flood.

At a time when Nigeria was underdeveloped and with limited resources, the task of effecting change was tremendous. Chief Awolowo was able to do this through the use of one skill in particular: visionary leadership. That is precisely what is missing today in the management of our institutions. We once blamed the woes on the British. The British left but the woes remained. Then the politicians were replaced by the military. The woes continued. Then we blamed the military and called for democracy. Greater woes. Now is the time to call for

accountability and visionary leadership of the type demonstrated by the example of Chief Awolowo.

Thus, we can talk of an Awolowo Doctrine, which, over time, has now become the very doctrine of the majority of Nigerians. Let there be one Nigeria, an indivisible entity. He so much believed in Nigeria that he dedicated his autobiography not to his wife of inestimable value, but to “A New and Free Nigeria Where Individual Freedom and More Abundant Life Are Guaranteed to All Her Citizens.” He did not say that Nigeria should collapse into pieces, even when he regarded the space as an artificial creation of the British. He believed that political leaders ought to be committed to the maintenance of the country’s unity.

A second component was that there must be a constitution, republican in nature. States, with their local governments, should be semi-autonomous and federating units. He devoted considerable amount of reflections on the idea of federalism and how to put it into practice. His notion of federalism was located in democracy. To those who alleged that he wanted to take over government by force, they should be reminded of his belief that “Government by tyranny or dictatorship is maintainable only by the use of force and by various acts of repression and oppression against those who disagree with or are critical of the tyrant or dictator.”

Ultimately, this reflected his belief that the business of government is about people. He insisted that resources should be devoted to the elimination of poverty. He was opposed to expensive expenditure on the military and defence on the grounds that spending resources meant for development on arms was unproductive. He was in support of building an army to protect the country and its territorial integrity, but not “as an instrument for maintaining a totalitarian regime”. He warned, “Any government that does not enjoy the goodwill of the people should resign: it must not utilize the people’s money for the purpose both of their enslavement and starvation.”

The focus on people led to the third doctrine: progress and development. All citizens must be educated, and he was the principal figure in the introduction of free universal primary education in the Western Region in 1955. The educated citizens must be active in developing the country’s resources. For Nigeria to progress he argued that the state must use the resources of the nation to cater to the people by creating jobs, making education available, and creating the conditions to have access to the basic necessities of life: housing, food, clothing, and health. He linked an economic set of objectives to the larger principles of state objective: “the more prosperous a State is, and the more equitably and justly distributed its wealth is, the less liable it is to the danger of internal disorder and the more able it is to discourage external aggression.”

The objectives his work itemizes were grounded in welfare politics. His own personal narratives of overcoming poverty became translated into the project of allowing all to do the same. He genuinely believed that no one should be poor and was most happy when formulating and implementing policies to eradicate poverty. He believed that poverty is manmade, “the direct outcome of an inhuman and ungodly social order, in which a strong, selfish, ruthless few exploit and deprive the masses of the people, politically and economically.” The state, he argued, is the

only one with the resources and capability to eliminate poverty and ensure equality of opportunity to children, irrespective of the income of their parents.

However, the most important lesson to take away from Chief Awolowo's work is his prescription for the implementation of welfare politics. His legacy to Nigeria, and indeed the world, is the proposal of critical conceptions that must be infused into political leadership. He argued that leadership must be grounded in ethics—a morality of spending resources more carefully, without corruption, and with compassion for people. Leadership must respect the rules of law and human rights and cannot be based on violence and the oppression of alternate political ideology. As Chief Awolowo concluded, politics is about vision, the politics of formulating ideas and objectives, the politics of presenting those objectives, and the politics of implementing them. People cannot be expected to accept a set of objectives different from their own aspirations. Neither will they accept leaders who say one thing and do another or who create budgets on grandiose projects only to divert public money to their private pockets. Leadership is about service—no more no less. Wesley College got it right in its motto: “Bi Eniti Nse Iranse” (as he that serveth), drawn from Luke 22:27. While the secondary schools of the time, whose mottos were in Latin, ridiculed this Yoruba one, the young Awolowo saw servant-leadership in practice; the students lived the motto, did everything for themselves, and ran the school using teamwork. A nation is teamwork. Chief Awolowo wanted to serve, and he also sought to lead.

Today, public service has become about accumulation and personal aggrandizement in which the leader becomes the master. The state is imperialized, converting citizens into subjects, resources into private ownership. Politics is about how to control people and resources, and the game of politics is how to game opponents to create greater access to the spoils of office. The higher the level of power, the more the resources that flow to private pockets so that the wealthy is the one with the closest access to the corridors of power. In that environment, power brings wealth, fame and adulation, not public service.

If Chief Awolowo were still alive he would argue that we need a set of leaders who will be our servants not our bosses, who will not ask us to look at their grandiose houses while we live in shanties, who will endure the same kind of suffering as the majority of the population, whose children will attend the same public schools as those of their “subjects,” who will use the local hospitals when they are sick. He would make the same immortal statement he made over sixty years ago: “It is the amount of patriotism, unstinted effort and wisdom which we apply to the exploitation of our vast resources, and of the just and equitable distribution of the results of such exploitation, that will determine the measure of our greatness and happiness as a people.” His slogan, “freedom to all, life more abundant,” will forever remain true. Let us all work for it.