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Obafemi Awolowo Matters — FEMI TAIWO

February 15, 2010 13:29, 48 views

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The profusion of activities attendant upon the centenary of Awolowo's birth attests the fact that few, if any, Nigerian would doubt that he matters. Of course, outside of Nigeria's borders there are too few people who are familiar with the man, his works—political and intellectual—and his legacy. And that is a problem, if not a crying shame. But I dare say that even among the ranks of non-Nigerians familiar with his works, none likely will deny that Awolowo matters. The problem, though, is that even among those who are in no doubt that Awolowo matters, extremely few know why and how Awolowo matters or why and how Awolowo matters ought to occupy more scholars the world over than that is the case at present.

There are many reasons for ignorance of and lack of attention to Awolowo's monumental achievements. When we think of Kwame Nkrumah or Julius Nyerere, there is a good reason why many, within and without their homelands, know why and how they matter. They both led their countries. Awolowo never did. As a result of the visibility that being Presidents offered, many scholars, African and non-African alike, have devoted their energies to expounding Nkrumah's and Nyerere's ideas beyond merely appraising their respective performances as leaders of their countries. That has not been the case with Awolowo. He has always suffered the relative inattention that afflicts regional leaders outside of their regions. It has seemed to matter little to scholars that Awolowo had a national career as a leader—Leader of the Opposition in the Federal Parliament. What is more, the severe crisis of confidence that afflicts Nigerian, nay, African scholars in their preference for foreign, mostly Euro-American, subjects for their intellectual exertions meant that until about 25 years ago, Awolowo did not attract the attention of scholars and his writings were not taught nor his ideas expounded upon in Nigerian universities.

I am happy to report that the situation has improved appreciably and Awolowo is fast approaching the level of interest in his work that other African thinkers have enjoyed. We witness this in the number of works that have been published on the man's ideas and the growing number of dissertations that are being written on his works. Yet, at home in Nigeria where Awolowo did all his work, where he profoundly touched and drastically changed lives, much of the attention devoted to him is superficial.

The impact of this widespread ignorance can be seen in the fact that Awolowo's homeland, the immediate laboratory for his social, political, economic and cultural experiments has, to put it mildly, regressed and now exhibits some of the worst maladies that Awolowo's intellectual and practical exertions were designed to attenuate, if not eradicate. We find indisputable evidence of this in the dilapidated infrastructure, in all sectors; in the general collapse of all that Awolowo led us to expect we have a right to have and to enjoy: education, healthcare, agriculture, industrialisation and gainful employment.

Of course, there are enough people going about shouting that they are Awoists. One laments the fact that they do not evince much, if any, of the traits that made Awolowo such an important thinker: his intellectual accomplishments and his discipline. Nor can we say that the successor regimes, beginning with the Unity Party of Nigeria, UPN, through the Alliance for Democracy, AD, to the present time have learnt any serious lessons from what makes Awolowo the giant that he was: his original thinking and incomparable erudition. This point is likely to be misconstrued. My fundamental and abiding interest in Awolowo is that of a scholar. I am fascinated by the originality, depth, and audacity of his thinking in many areas, the richness and complexity of his expostulations, the sophistication and thoroughness of his policy formulations; in short, in his status as one of the preeminent thinkers the last century. What we have instead of scholarly engagements are laughable claims to Awolowo's inheritance built only on sloganeering and, worse, empty symbolism, especially retro fashion in headgear and the round-rimmed glasses. Yet, as serious Awolowo scholars can testify, even Awolowo's slogans were distillations of profound thinking and intellectual engagements.

Now it is very easy to think that the dilapidation and collapse of which I speak are practical problems that an earnest governor and government can easily take care of. Witness the tremendous strides that have been reported in, everyone says, Lagos, under Raji Fashola, the governor. That will be a mistake. For Awolowo, the foci of his exertions were never, strictly speaking, practical problems. They were apprehended by him at the philosophical level and the theoretical blueprints he came up with owed everything to his philosophical anthropology, that is, his philosophy of human nature; his views of who ought to rule where not all can rule, that is, his theory of political obligation or what some will call the moral distribution of political power in a state; and his understanding of what constitutes a good society and the best means for realising it, one of the perennial questions of ethics and political philosophy.

The programmes that he designed, championed, and implemented were merely practical manifestations of deep intellectual engagement with philosophy and the history of ideas. I am suggesting that it is not enough to want to build schools when you have not thought long and hard about those for whom the schools are being built, what kind of education would empower them to realise their best potential, etc. Rather, now we build schools because children must go to school even if there are no teachers, or they are bloody incompetent and unmotivated, and the school buildings hardly rise above the level of chicken coops, etc. We can do better at this stage of our historical and material existence. In any case, I am sure that Awolowo would not have been approbative of such a manner of proceeding. The humanist in him would have been horrified by such a decidedly expedient approach to the management of human destiny. Motivated by a primary concern with the dignity of human beings which had been battered under colonial rule, Awolowo sought "freedom for all, and life more abundant"—we must not ignore the lexical ordering that placed freedom before abundance—and insisted that that dignity is impaired unless it were exercised in institutions marked by beauty. We see evidence of this in the enduring beauty, not to talk of function, of the structures that Awolowo had a hand in building. To give but one important example: contrast the ugly restoration of Cocoa House with its original shimmering, lithe beauty!

Certainly, in explaining the current situation, we must not discount the devastating impact of military rule, especially on the imagination of Nigerian youth most of whom were born after 1970 and whose political socialisation has unfolded for



the most part under military tutelage. The trend towards ugliness and mediocrity began under the military and progressively got worse the longer military rule lasted. We have now come to the point where no one thinks of beauty or grandeur in the design of our public spaces and everything is now dominated by how quickly it can be built so that the dash can be secured and a plaque stuck on it in futile attempts at securing immortality for the worst of our pretenders to greatness.

But so limiting the cause of our current predicament to the ravages of military rule alone will be mistaken. Unlike our present rulers, Awolowo's practical engagements were built on some solid, very profound philosophical foundations. If we are to come to an understanding of how Awolowo matters we need to take a good look at all the issues that dominate contemporary debates in Nigeria, at large, and in the former Western Region, specifically. When we do we are likely to find that more than any other Nigerian, with the possible exception of Ahmadu Bello, Awolowo has not merely engaged them, he has thought and written about them, and has the most sophisticated positions on them. I have left out Nnamdi Azikiwe because his impact has been in other areas outside of the ones here under review. An article on pan-Africanism would have Zik's signature all over it. I merely contend here that awareness of Awolowo's positions and the possible help they might avail as we seek to fast forward our land and culture to the twenty-first century might make all the difference to setting and achieving our goals.

Very few young people now know how and why Awolowo matters. They hear the slogans but they don't know the deep thought the slogans were coined to distill. I don't see how we can begin to undo the philistinism that military rule has made the quintessence of our lives in the West and mobilise young minds once again to embrace idealism, optimism and nobility and not just be content to "make it" unless we begin to make available in language that is accessible without being condescending the core ideas that made Awolowo such a powerful presence in global intellectual history.

Opinion



[Save The Children From These Names! —Chichi Aniaogolu-Okove](#)

Awolowo wrote and he sought to realise in practice what he wrote or, at least, thought. As a result we have works that we can tap into to inspire us at the present time and to prepare a future that would retrieve and, simultaneously, supersede the glorious past that we all associated, and rightly so, with Awolowo and his works. I consider a few illustrative examples.

[Obafemi Awolowo Matters — FEMI TAIWO](#)



[What You Deny Others Today Will Defy You Tomorrow! —Kole Omotoso](#)

Federalism has become popular again. No other Nigerian thinker, including all our professors of political science—and I know that of which I speak—has written anything more original or better than Awolowo's theory of federalism. Again, the point being made here is apt to be misunderstood. Awolowo's theory of federalism represents a creative adaptation of ideas that he culled from some of the classics of federalist literature with a very thorough investigation of the empirical data regarding the demographic distribution of nationalities and ethnicities within the boundaries of Nigeria. His aim was to come up with theoretical postulations regarding what geopolitical structure is most likely to conduce to the even development of Nigeria and the advancement of its diverse population. Unfortunately, our penchant for always seeking to work on themes that might endear us to foreign sponsors has meant that few are the Nigerian scholars who can lay claim to being experts on this aspect of Awolowo's ideas. It might be an indication of how sound the promise of Awolowo's theory was, Thoughts on the Nigerian Constitution was a frequent companion of Ken Saro-Wiwa in his heroic quest for Ogoni self-determination. In a more decent environment in which the life of the mind is celebrated, many would be the writings around Awolowo's postulates on federalism. Few would be the baseless accusations of tribalism usually levelled at Awolowo on account of those postulates.

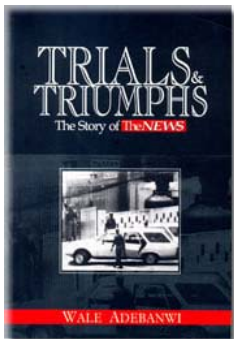
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One of the practical implications of Awolowo's philosophical anthropology was his insistence on humans having sound minds in healthy bodies—mens sana in corpore sano, was his preferred Latin rendering. Sports, games, and sundry physical exercises designed to strengthen the body were integral parts of the people's academy that was supposed to be the crucible in which the superior minds were to be forged that would deliver on the promise of life more abundant and freedom for all for the members of the People's Republic. I am deliberately omitting that direct inspiration from Plato that Awolowo not only acknowledged but celebrated in his magnum opus: The People's Republic. If sports and other forms of physical activities were adjudged integral to the best life possible for humans, is it any wonder then that Awolowo would build, as one of the first tasks of his administration in the defunct Western Region in the immediate post-independence period, a befitting temple to the cultivation and celebration of healthy bodies: the Liberty Stadium. In other words, I am suggesting that the Liberty Stadium was not a prestige project and it definitely was not built for purposes of having a plaque celebrate Awolowo. Because it was meant to be the physical manifestation of deep philosophical convictions, the Liberty Stadium was, for its time and context, big, beautiful, and well-constructed. It said a lot about the vision that undergirded its building that the stadium had a capacity for 55,000 spectators and the National Stadium, built to serve the entire country more than ten years later, originally had a capacity for 65,000 spectators.

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Awolowo was a gifted, even if self-taught, student of political economy and its historical evolution. Although he was an avowed socialist, he did not subscribe to the idea that the state had to control every aspect of economic production. As he insisted in his writings, socialism was more of an attitude than a system of production of goods and services. He wanted to preserve the prodigious production associated with capitalism while using the instrumentality of the state, especially through taxation, to effect a more equitable distribution of the wealth that is produced, especially with regards to providing the lower classes with the resources requisite for humane living with dignity. This philosophical orientation combined with his study of political economy led him to use the state to create enabling conditions for private capital to operate and for the state to use its power to put in place the infrastructure necessary for wealth and job creation as well as the wherewithal for funding the social services the provision of which by his administration assumed legendary proportions. What has now been reduced to expedient means predicated on the abdication by the state of its responsibility to its citizens—so-called public/private sector partnership—originated for Awolowo in carefully articulated, well-grounded philosophical and politico-economic principles as well as a critical engagement with comparative political economy in other parts of the world. This is one area that can use specialised studies in the larger context of Awolowo scholarship.

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Writing in his autobiography, Awolowo affirmed his unhesitating and unequivocal preference for Western democracy in the context of the then existing division of the world into ideological camps. His unyielding and, till his death, undiminished commitment to liberal democracy was an integral part of his embrace of the much wider movement of modernity. This is not the place to expound upon this larger claim. I limit myself here to pointing out how this democratic preference has not been seriously studied or canvassed by scholars of Awolowo, not to talk of his followers. Yet, the investment in liberal representative democracy based on the party system and universal adult suffrage, in which free citizens freely choose their representatives in electoral contests marked by clear articulation of ideas and policies, ranks as Awolowo's most significant commitment.

And I dare say that it was, in part, his commitment to the freedom of the individual to choose those who shall rule him/her and to not be subject to a government in the constitution of which she has had no part, which is the metaphysical foundation of liberal representative democracy, that stood in the way of his acceptance by the elite in the northern part of Nigeria. It is a testament to this preference of his that Awolowo departed from the colonial regime's preference for rule by chiefs and subjected "traditional authority" to that of modern elected officials. That is, in spite of Awolowo's much-vaunted and justly celebrated enthusiasm for Yoruba culture, he made it clear that chiefs could no longer enjoy any supremacy in politics relative to the elected representatives of the people. In other words, the elected representatives of

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the people were superior to successors to "traditional authority" derived from inheritance, appointment, and other forms of ascription. This is a feat that is yet to be duplicated in areas of Nigeria still dominated by the emirate system and backsliding from which in Western Nigeria continue to hold the rest of us back, even as I write this.

I would like to think that multiplying illustrations of Awolowo's philosophical genius in the present discussion would be otiose. Areas that a larger study of the sort that I said motivated this article will cover include his philosophy of education, his model of the mass political party—an idea that he introduced to Nigeria—his prescient recognition of the centrality of communication in the modern polity, his sponsorship of research into Yoruba culture and just his general insistence that the service of the masses is the only justification for seeking public office.

At no time than now is it imperative for us to remind older folk of, and introduce younger minds to, why and how Awolowo matters. What is more, in light of the just concluded commemoration of the centenary of Awolowo's birth, we require a single volume that will distill for us, leaders and followers alike, as well as scholars, Awolowo's core ideas and how reconnecting to those ideas is the best route to remaking the magic for which the man is justly celebrated. Any sponsors out there?

– *Malam Femi Táiwò wrote this piece from Seattle, U.S.A.*

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