

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY: AWOISM

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Introduction:

Until quite recently, African philosophy was a discipline understood in a homogeneous and monolithic sense by both African and foreign scholars. It is not only that Africa is so vast and that there is not just one philosophy in the whole of Africa, it is also the case that African philosophy can be richly and heterogeneously understood and historically demarcated into several periods and epochs.

Much of the work that has been done by scholars in African philosophy would qualify to be described mainly as Ancient African philosophy. That being the case, we may want to ask: has Africa not got modern and contemporary philosophies? Of course, she has got like other peoples. But, there is not yet much focus and attention on these types and genres of philosophy. The paucity and dearth of publications in these areas support our contention.

This article introduces one of Africa's contemporary philosophies called Awoism. It seeks to evaluate also the on-going researches into this philosophy. The best way to focus on Awoism, however, is to start with the person of Awolowo himself.

PART ONE

Obafemi Awolowo: Life and Works (1909—1987) ¹

For most people, Awolowo is only a politician. For a lesser group, he is known and remembered, also, as an economist and a lawyer. But such a view is inadequate. From time immemorial, the philosopher has been reputed and revered by society as a lover of wisdom and truth. He is one who, through the light of God's given reason, constantly attempts to identify and solve the problems of man in the society. Awolowo has established, beyond any shadow of doubt, what a critical thinker he is, an idealist who projects ahead of his time and people, and one who is consistent and courageous in pursuing and speaking of the truth at all times. The only concern of Awolowo all through his life has been that of seeking the welfare and happiness of man in the Nigerian society. He has, through the sheer study of human character and behaviour, acquired a deep insight into the nature of man. This has enabled him to propound and postulate principles and laws by which society can achieve maximum well-being and welfare. The soundness of these principles, especially with regards to government, has been efficiently and successfully implemented while he was the Premier of the Western Region (1951—1959) and the Vice-President and Finance Minister of the Federal Government of Nigeria under General Yakubu Gowon.²

I make bold to assert, however, that Awolowo is first and foremost a moral philosopher³ and only secondly a politician. This is because he believes morality is the true basis of the politico-economic order, and that any political system that is morally bankrupt is bound to burst asunder. Our recent historical experience of Nigerian politics has proved right this timeless truth upheld by him.

As many men, however, prefer darkness to light and falsehood to truth, one is not surprised that Awolowo has aroused a lot of controversy round his being and personality and has made foes as well as friends. President Babangida is, therefore, right when he wrote to Awolowo:

Indeed, you have raised political discussion and debate in our country to a level yet to be rivalled in any other country on the continent of Africa. It can be truly said that Chief Obafemi has been the main issue in Nigerian politics during the last 35 years; the main political question has been whether you are with Chief Awolowo or against him.⁴

Works:

Awolowo has the following works, cited here in chronological order, to his credit:

- *Path to Nigerian Freedom* (1947) This book was written while Awolowo was a student in London (1944—46). It describes British colonialism and rule in Nigeria and sets out a blue-print for political freedom in Nigeria.
- *Awo: Autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo* (1960) Published to mark Nigeria's political independence.
- *Thoughts on Nigerian Constitution* (1966) Awolowo wrote this in prison at Calabar; it is the first of the trilogy in which Awolowo exposes the essence of his political philosophy. But in this work, propositions are made for a federal constitution in a linguistically diverse Nigeria.
- *The People's Republic* (1968) is the greatest of Awolowo's political works. It describes Awolowo's ideal state as a great welfarist, prosperous and democratically socialist state.
- *My Early Life* (1968) is an abridged edition of Awolowo's autobiography.
- *The Strategy and Tactics of the People's Republic* (1970) is a description of how a socialist state can work in practice.
- *The Problems of Africa* (1976) Awolowo reaches maturity in socialism here, advocating a hardcore socialist approach and solution (e.g.

nationalization) to the socio-economic problems of the African continent.

- *Awo on the Nigerian Civil War* (1981) is a record of Awolowo's role as a man of peace and a proven economic genius in Nigeria's agonizing period.
- *Path to Nigerian Greatness* (1981) This is as important as the *People's Republic* in its proposals for development of Nigeria but evidently contains new *approaches* to socialist economy, especially the advocacy from 1978 for economic privatization, as a means to realizing a welfarist state.
- *Voice of Courage* (1981) is the first of the three volumes of important socio-economic and political speeches from the launching of the Action Group in 1951 until the period of his confinement in cell in 1963. It carries themes in economic development and freedom based on the principles of democratic socialism.
- *Voice of Reason* (1981) is the second volume. It is a record of invaluable speeches from 1963 until 1980 and deals with ethico-political principles of economic development.
- *Voice of Wisdom* (1981) is the third volume. It contains speeches made in the 1970s. The topics deal with the nature of the "good life" in Nigerian society from the religio-political perspective.
- *Adventures in Power, Book I: My March Through Prison* (1985). Is the first of yet another series of Awolowo's works. This deals with his trial, sentence and release from prison on what he calls a trumped up case of treason by his political enemies.
- *Adventures in Power, Book II: The Travails of Democracy and the Rule of Law* (1987). This is a story about extreme intolerance and violent: show of power to political opposition by those in government.
- *Adventures in Power, Book III: For the Good of the People* (Unpublished).

As it has been the general attitude of regarding African thought as pre-and post-rational, but never rational and logical, it is pertinent to state that anyone who in these works looks forward to something bizarre and queer and different from human reasoning and applied universal principles will surely be disappointed.

PART TWO

What Is Awoism ?

Perhaps the most difficult discipline to define is philosophy. Philosophers do not seem to agree among themselves on what is the nature of their discipline. This is evident in the fact that there are as many definitions of philosophy as there are philosophers generally. However, philosophy is understood to mean the critical human reflection and discussion about the ultimate. In strict sense, it is intended to mean the natural and intellectual efforts of man to find solutions to the fundamental issues and problems of his being and existence.

Omoboriowo was the first to give prominence to Awoism. But, he interpreted it as a political slogan or ideology⁵ rather than as a "philosophy". This is incorrect. Awolowo himself showed in his Autobiography (1960) that he disliked the ideological label because of its uncriticalness and rigidity.⁶ On the contrary, Awoism is a philosophy. It is a critical thinking and reflection of Awolowo on the problems of man in society. Naturally, like other philosophies, it has its particular context and background, namely the Nigerian historical experience. Awoism belongs to the idealist and rationalist tradition and has the following as its salient features.

Reality:

Awoism as a philosophical speculation begins with the nature of reality. In "The People's Republic" which contains the essence of Awolowo's idealist metaphysics, reality or the universe is defined as a whole: a rational orderly and purposeful cosmos which is divided into two spheres or compartments, namely, the natural, physical and visible and the supernatural, spiritual and invisible. God exists and is a perfect Being. He is the first principle or reason of the universe. His immutable law or "Universal Mind" permeates, pervades and unifies all things.

We begin by affirming an *a priori* proposition that the universe is a cosmos and not a chaos. There is an immutable law which rules in the physical world of matter and actions as well as in the intangible and subjective world of thoughts, ideas and ideals. This immutable law is sometimes referred to as the Universal Mind; it is latent, dormant and inactive until it is set in motion by human thoughts, words and actions.⁽⁷⁾

Nature:

This is the external and physical realm of things. Awolowo's views are based on modern physics. Matter is composed of divisible atomic particles whose degree of electromagnetic vibrations determines the shape and size of the different kinds of things that exist. Nature has its

own laws, e.g. dynamism, change and motion, energy and force (causality). These are operated dialectically but not materialistically as in Marx, or mechanistically as in Aristotle. The laws of nature are, in fact, spiritual, integrative and unifying in essence, since they derive ultimately from the Universal Mind (God).

The world is however perfectible. Like Aristotle, Awolowo admits the evidences of counter-current display by irrational, destructive and disintegrative forces (chaos). Verily, the world is factual and limited.

The world is created in time and limited in space.⁸

The duty and responsibility of shaping, controlling and perfecting too high the world rests squarely in the hands of man who is its centre point and purpose.

Man:

Man is the sole agent in nature. But the basis of human uniqueness and greatness lies in his intellectual, moral and spiritual faculties. Awolowo would disagree with Rousseau that man is born free but everywhere in chains. Man is free even when in chains (Hegel). He is free and the master of his destiny. The sky is the limit for his aspirations and achievements. The irrational forces of nature, physiological malfunctioning and even corruptive social influences can only impede but cannot stop him.

Man is also morally responsible for his deeds and actions. The basis is to be found in the powers of the mind and will and in the powers of the spirit which transcend over and beyond those of the body of which he is also constituted.⁹ At this juncture, the role of knowledge and education becomes significant in the anthropology (and political philosophy) of Awolowo. Every man should cultivate the mind through acquiring knowledge and be educated through the moral discipline of the mind and character. The attainment of mental height or "mental magnitude"¹⁰ is the *conditio sine qua non* for self-realization, politico-economic well-being and the transformation of society at large.

The State:

Awoism is not just a philosophy, it is a Christian humanism as well. It advocates the happiness of man on earth. Awolowo has a welfare state, and in Laskian fashion, the state should be instrumental in the realization of this objective. Education, food, housing, health facilities and labour opportunities are basic socio-economic rights and needs of man and not luxuries. Government's duty is to provide services to citizens. It is unfortunate, however, that, so far, these continue to suffer because the right type of people are not voted into power, or are prevented from

getting there through electoral malpractices—rigging, unorthodox and unconstitutional tenacity of rule, or even military intervention and dictatorship as experienced in Nigeria and other countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Justiciability of Social Objectives¹¹

It is however in the justiciability of social objectives that we have the gem of Awoistic socio-political philosophy. This is the doctrine that government is a pact made between the ruler and the ruled: government and citizens. It is believed in this pact that while citizens obey the laws of the state, the government would provide necessary services, protect the rights and property of the people, and that the people have the legitimate right to take the government to court for redress when they feel that their welfare is neglected or their fundamental and constitutional rights are violated by their government. In other words, if the government fails to provide any group of people with essential amenities like education and health facilities, employment, the government can be and should be sued to court. Or, if any government institution becomes a bastion of suffering and its agents (e.g. the police) and instrument of death as in the recent student crisis in our Universities, Awolowo thinks the people can and should go to court.

The radicality of the doctrine of justiciability is that no one who aspires to rule should ever consider government as the place for pleasure, laziness, mental indolence, planlessness, corruption and moral depravity. Government means the opposite of these vices.

No one however, in our view, has shown an understanding of awoistic doctrine of justiciability so much as Archbishop Olubunmi Okogie when he took the ex-governor Lateef Jakande to court over the issue of private schools. It is, therefore, clear that justiciability presupposes respect for the rule of law. This points out also a hidden fact, namely, that it is not the politician who really controls the affairs and destiny of the State, but the judges and the judiciary which arbitrate between truth and falsity, and protect the citizen's fundamental human and democratic rights. The courageous and emphatic nature of this doctrine is what makes it Awolowo's singular contribution to contemporary African political thought.

Nevertheless, all hope is not lost. Although no one socio-political system is perfect, the Nigerian society can, in the view of Awolowo, be salvaged still from its present crisis if it is re-structured and organized on the basis of a democratic socialism which includes human rights (free press) and the rule of law, free flow of capital and private enterprise as well as judicious taxation by the state which is secular in religious matters.¹²

Morality:

"As you sow, so you shall reap"¹³. This is the moral belief of Awolowo and the basis of Awoistic morality. Human and national development entail hardwork and an excellence in any field of endeavour should be the goal of everybody¹⁴. Some prefer evil to good, however. Awolowo is not disturbed in the least by the temporal display and triumph of evil in society. History has shown times without number that truth and justice will prevail eventually. For when all human efforts fail, divine providence intervenes¹⁵.

Awoists and Awologists:

Since this writer published his work on Awolowo in 1986, and since Awolowo himself died a year after, a new consciousness has arisen among Nigerian scholars, and a spate of research works has emerged on the local and international scenes about Obafemi Awolowo's philosophy¹⁶. To distinguish Awoism, at its infancy from merely spurious, praise-singing biographies on Awolowo written especially by long standing fanatical political devotees, known as Awoists, this same writer had deemed it necessary to suggest the use of the term "Awology"¹⁷. Awology means Awolowo and Awoism; that is, the critical study of the person and philosophy of Awolowo. In differentiation from the political bigots called Awoists, therefore, the academic researchers in Awoism are known as Awologists.

Conclusion:

Be that as it may, what can we say of Awoism? It is truly a philosophy of our time and undoubtedly a good response to the turning of African philosophy into ethnology and anthropology by foreign scholars—something which has brought about the over-emphasis of traditional African philosophy which we referred to at the beginning of this article. The works, papers and articles of Awolowo are primary literature and are still quite unknown to the outside world. So, Awologists have a responsibility to develop Awoism. But let us sound a note of advice. More studies should be carried out on issues in the realms of metaphysics, physics, epistemology, Law, esthetics and religion etc. as they relate to Awoism rather than concentrating on socio-political ones as is presently the trend. The last Conference on Awo titled *Awolowo: The End of An Era?* at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 1987, is, therefore, just a step in the right direction.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For a study of his life see F. I. Ogunmodede, *Chief Obafemi Awolowo's Socio-Political Philosophy*, Rome, 1985, Chapter 1. pp. 25—29.
2. General Yakubu Gowon who ruled Nigeria from 1966 to 1975 pardoned and released Awolowo from prison in 1966. Awolowo then served under him all through the Civil War and until 1971 when he resigned, as Federal Minister of Finance and Vice-President of the Federal Executive Council.
3. Cf. M. Makinde, *Awo As a Philosopher*, Unpublished paper presented at the National Conference on "Obafemi Awolowo: The End of An Era? Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 1987, pp. 1—4.
4. "Banbangida Rejoices with Awo at 77." In *The Guardian*, Lagos, Nigeria, 7th March, 1986, p.2.
5. Cf. F. I. Ogunmodede, *Op. cit.*, pp. 269—272 for details. Also see E. O. Adeniyani, *A Comprehensive Bibliography on the writings and works of Chief Obafemi Awolowo 1940—1984*. Ikenne, 1984 (Unpublished).
6. Cf. A. Omoboriowo, "Awoism—Restatement of an Ideology", in *Awoism*, Ibadan, Evans Brothers Limited, 1982, p. 11.
7. O. Awolowo, *Awo. the Autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969. p. 283.
8. O. Awolowo, *The People's Republic*, Ibadan, Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 186.
9. Ibidem, p. 188.
10. Ibidem, pp. 211—231.
11. Cf. F. I. Ogunmodede *Op. cit.* pp. 120—121.
12. O. Awolowo, *Thoughts on Nigerian Constitution*, Ibadan, Oxford University Press, 1966, pp. 150—151.
13. Galatians 6:7.
14. O. Awolowo, *The Strategy and Tactics of the People's Republic of Nigeria*, London, Macmillan, 1970, pp. 98—99.
15. O. Awolowo, *U. P. N. Presidential Address*, Abeokuta, U.P.N. Publicity, 1983, pp. 21—22.
16. Vide O. O. Oyelaran et al, (eds) *Awolowo: The End of An Era?* Ile-Ife, Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 1988. Also Vide M. A. Makinde. "Mental Magnitude: Awolowo's search for Ultimate Reality. Meaning and the Supreme Value of Human Existence" in *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* (Inter-disciplinary studies in the philosophy of Understanding) Toronto, University of Toronto press, Vol. 10 No. 1 March 1987, p. 13.
17. Cf. F. I. Ogunmodede, *The Case for Awology* Lagos, 1986 (Unpublished Paper). It is the title of the speech that was delivered at the launching of *Obafemi Awolowo's Socio-political philosophy* at the Institute of International Affairs, Lagos, on 28th June, 1986, p. 5.

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