

Yoruba-Igbo Rivalry 1937-1970: A Historical Analysis of the Birth of Nigeria's Political Dilemma

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Abstract. The political rivalry between the Yoruba and Igbo ethnic nations revolved around their undisputed leaders-Obafemi Awolowo and Nnamdi Azikiwe. It began with the return from the Gold Coast of Nnamdi Azikiwe. His return engendered an Igbo educational awareness that soon challenged the Yoruba domination of the economic and political life of the country; leaving in its wake the carcass of the once vibrant Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM). The brief thaw manifested in the formation of the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC) evaporated with the death of Herbert Macaulay, the erstwhile president of the party in which Nnamdi Azikiwe was the general secretary, Nnamdi Azikiwe and the NCNC did not take kindly to the formation by Obafemi Awolowo and his colleagues of the Edge Omo Oduduwa and subsequently the Action Group (AG). If anything, the general elections of 1951/52 into the Central Legislature exacerbated the rivalry rendering impossible hopes of Coalition governments by the NCNC and AG after the federal elections of 1959 and 1964; and in the process allowed the Northern People's Congress (NPC) to dictate the direction, pace, and character of Nigeria's political development, a trend that not even the military interventions and the civil war were unable to alter. This paper attempts to deepen our understanding of this rivalry and concludes that & worked to the utter disadvantage of the two ethnic nations and the Nigerian nation-state.

Keywords: History, Nigeria, Political Dilemma, Yoruba-Igbo Rivalry.



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INTRODUCTION

British colonial authorities in Nigeria were notorious for their Indifference on matters of provision of social amenities for the masses in urban centers that sprang up in response to economic activities they engendered (Smock 2013). This void was filled albeit poorly by communal associations that emerged in the urban centre across the country. Always working or seeking jobs far from their communal homelands, members of these associations came to depend on the associations in times of hardship which were often not far away. In return for the succor given by the associations, members transferred their loyalty to them rather than the colonial state. Thus a bond of solidarity was formed in which shared history, successes and rewards were sinews (Odey et al., 2019; Odey 2018; Okoi 2021a; Okoi 2021b). They fought their socio-economic battles together against other communal associations or out-groups. Group successes increased and deepened members' sense of belonging just as a threat to an association was seen as a threat to its members.

While Obafemi Awolowo was born on March 6, 1909, Nnamdi Azikiwe was born on November 16, 1904, respectively in Ikenue and Zungeru in present-day Ogun and Niger states of Nigeria (Oduguwa 2012). Born in rural settings of Nigeria, these two gentlemen through sheer determination, doggedness and hard work not only succeeded in their educational adventures, but also rose to the leadership of their respective ethnic nations by the middle of the 1940s, and thus introduced themselves to the Nigerian political scene (Oduguwa 2012).

THE RISE OF THE NIGERIAN YOUTH MOVEMENT

Dissatisfied with the uncoordinated spate of nationalist agitations in Nigeria in the 1920s, James Churchill Vanghan, Ernest Sesei Ikoli and Samuel Akisanya among others founded the Nigeria Youth Movement (NYM) to "lay a solid foundation for the development of the nationalist spirit in Nigeria (Arifalo 1986). This idea immediately caught on as the NYM in its charter published in 1938 unification of the ethnic nations of Nigeria through a search for a common deal. It was in the search for the attainment of this objective that the new body opened branches in Ibadan, Ijebu Ode, Warri and Benin in the western; Aba, Enugu, Port Harcourt and Calabar in the Eastern and Jos, Kaduna, Zaira and Kano in the Northern provinces respectively; and by 1938 claimed a membership of 10,000 and nearly 20 provincial branches (Momah 2013).

No sooner than the NYM found its feet than it was confronted with problems that posed a mortal threat to its existence. In 1937 Nnamdi Azikiwe returned from his sojourn on the Gold Coast and joined the Movement (Von Eschen 2014). He soon found himself at odds with the Movement. First, his newspaper, the *West African pilot*, an aggressive nationalist paper fell into a fierce competition with *The Nigerian Daily Service* a Lagos based newspaper which editor, Ernest Sesei Ikoli, was noted for his journalist skills. *The Nigerian Daily Service* was to the bargain, the mouthpiece of the NYM; even though the *West African Pilot* consistently and unequivocally championed

the NYM cause. Since the reading public was small, the fierce competition translated to financial losses to Nnamdi Azikiwe; prompting in the process Azikiwe's enthusiasm for the NYM to immediately begin 'to wane (Von Eschen 2014). He soon resigned from the Movement's executive committee. Pleading preoccupation with business activities he later resigned his membership altogether. Even though he later retracted his resignation, yet he ceased to be an effective member of the Movement.

Much more worrying Azikiwe started berating NYM leaders who were mainly Yoruba: H. O. Davies who was "the Dynamo of the Movement" was now "a simpleton" while others were "imperialist stooges", "Uncle Toms" etc (Peters 2013). The NYM leadership did not find this sorry turn of events funny. A worried member bemoaned.

During the days of our "Old Africa," the Ibos and Yorubas lived together as Nigerians. It seems to therefore that the remedy for the present troubles is this, Azikwe has brought his 'New Africa from America He should return it there personally. If need be this passage to and fro should be paid by the Movement. But mark this, unless this Azikiwe's brand of New Africa is done away with there will be no harmony in this country (Awolowo 1960, p. 145).

This member voiced his frustration on account of two acts Nnamdi Azikiwe committed that amounted to sacrilege as far as the NYM was concentrated. First, were the editorials in the West African Pilot asking the colonial government not to appoint Adetokunbo Ademola as Nigeria's first magistrate, at a time the NYM was pushing for the Africanisation of the civil service. Second, was Nnamdi Azikiwe's rationalization of the failure of Samuel Akisanya's failure at the bye-election in 1941 to fill the seat in the Nigerian Legislative Council vacated by Kofo A. Abayomi on ethnicism (Tamuno 1970).

Why Nnamdi Azikiwe kicked against the appointment of Adetokunbo. Ademola's appointment is not clear if indeed he shared the aspirations of the NYM in which case the argument of lack of post-qualification experience of Adetokunbo Ademola did not arise. But then was ethnicism a factor in the legislative bye-election of 1941 as alleged by Nnamdi Azikiwe and Samuel Akisanya. The two candidates in the bye-election were Ernest Ikoli and Samuel Akisanya; president and vice president and founding members of the NYM and of Ijo and Ijebu Yoruba ethnic origins respectively, their top supporters were respectively Obafemi Awolowo an ijebu Yoruba and Nnamdi Azikwe, an Igbo. Ernest Ikoli won being voted for by an organization whose majority membership was Yoruba, More important; no Igbo man contested the bye-election. Clearly, this allegation of ethnicism as a factor in the victory of Ernest Ikoli lacks merit. But then it was clearly a sign of things to come as their top supporters were still in the shadows. Unfortunately for the NYM, It did not survive the crisis as Nnamdi Azikiwe and Samuel Akisanya left the Movement taking their Igbo and some of Ijebu supporters along with them. Nor was Obafemi Awolowo Impressed by Nnamdi Azikiwe's pro-Igbo biases - which went against the nationalist spirit of the times (Apeh 2015).

Other areas of contention between the Yoruba and the Igbo were the civil service and commerce. By accident of geography, the Yoruba were the first ethnic nation of Nigeria to come into contact with Western education and so had a head start. Naturally, they were the first Nigerian teachers, clerks, lawyers, doctors, engineers and ministers of religion. It was such that in the 1930s when the Igbo and other ethnic nations were welcoming back home their first overseas-trained members, a good number of Yoruba families were producing their own second or third generation of such foreign-trained professionals. Consequently, the Yoruba dominated the civil service and commercial sectors of the country.

Nnamdi Azikiwe's return from his studies in the USA in 1934 and his subsequent tours in the Eastern provinces inspired Igbo young men in their hundreds to go abroad for training (Azikiwe 1961). They soon started to return home and take up jobs in the civil service and commercial sectors of the country's economy. Igbo achievement in these sectors was such that by the late 1940s and early 1950s the yawning gap that existed between the two ethnic groups in the country's economy had virtually been closed with the Igbo now competing with the Yoruba for posts in the higher levels of the public and private sectors of the economy. The Yoruba naturally felt threatened, as they "saw their socio-economic dominance increasingly eroded by the rising rate of Igbo social mobility...and rallied around the phobia of Igbo domination (Azikiwe 1961).

The formation of ethnic associations was another area that the Yoruba and the Igbo were to clash - led respectively by Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo. The Ibibio State Union was the first ethnic union to be formed in Nigeria in 1928 at Ikot Ekpene; with the sole purpose of promoting social, educational and cultural activities of the Ibibio ethnic nation (Justice 1977). The third ethnic union was the Ibo Union, formed in Lagos in 1936. It became so vibrant that it had a London branch in 1943 (Justice 1977). It became the Igbo Federal Union in 1944 with a national anthem that was sung at the end of its meetings (Van Den Bersselaar 2005). It was in 1948 at a pan-Igbo conference in Aba converted to the Igbo State Union, with a mission to defend the political interests of the Igbo nation having united both the pro and anti-NCNC Igbo leaders under the presidency of Nnamdi Azikiwe (Van Den Bersselaar 2005; Undiyaundeye 2005a; Undiyaundeye 2009, Undiyaundeye 2017).

Azikiwe had appeared on the Nigerian political scene when the Igbo had little or no voice in the politics of the country. Yet through his journalistic skills, he awakened his ethnic compatriots and inspired them into attaining dizzy positions in the socio-economic spheres of the country destroying in the process the NYM which some Nigerian political leaders like Obafemi Awolowo had hoped would emerge as a powerful instrument of a single nationalism in Nigeria (Van Den Bersselaar 2005; Etim *et al.*, 2020; Okoi 2020). The origins of the formation of a Yoruba ethnic union are traced to the era of ethnic competition that had become a feature of the social and economic life of the country. An era when progress by an ethnic group was interpreted by others Yoruba had become very uncomfortable and insecure as the

previously “backward Igbo” overcame their disadvantages. Obafemi Awolowo decided in 1945 to form a Yoruba ethnic union also to combat the disintegrating forces of tribalism, stamp out discrimination within the group and against minorities and generally infuse the idea of a single nationality throughout the region (Adebanwi 2009).

The new association, when formed, would also dedicate itself to the social, political and economic welfare of Yorubaland, among other issues (Adebanwi 2009; Nwagbara *et al.*, 2009). Obafemi Awolowo has elected the pioneer secretary of the new ethnic union called Egbe Omo Oduduwa (Association of the Descendants of Oduduwa). Although he made spirited attempts to explain the aims and objectives of his new association to his Igbo student colleagues in London and had arranged a meeting between himself and the leadership of the Igbo Federal Union — which did not hold — to explain his position that in Egbe “was simply the Yoruba counterpart of the Ibo Federal Union”, yet he was branded an ethnic jingoist (Adebanwi 2009; Undiyaundeye 2005b; Undiyaundeye 2011). Generally, Igbo Federal Union and Nnamdi Azikiwe received the news of the formation of the Egbe with hostility: Eyo Ita had seen clearly the negative effect of these ethnic associations on Nigerian nationalism and argued that...“the greatest need of Nigerians today is to become a community... to evolve national selfhood...seek coordination among them (ethnic unions) in a way that will help to build a strong national consciousness” (Nnoli 1978, p. 141).

Clearly, neither Nnamdi Azikiwe nor Obafemi Awolowo or any other Nigerian ethnic leader shared Eyo Ita’s concerns about the negative effects of ethnic unions on Nigerian politics. The Egbe Omo Oduduwa was launched in Nigeria on November 28, 1947, at Tom Jones Hall, Lagos, on the return to the country of Obafemi Awolowo, now a qualified lawyer in 1946 (Adebanwi 2009). Nnamdi Azikiwe was not amused by the formation of the Egbe. The West African Pilot argued

But now that the Egbe has made it clear that its battle is not really against Dr. Azikiwe personally and not even against the aspirations of the 27 million Nigerians backing the NCNC, come for real action... Henceforth the cry must the time has been one of the battles against the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, its leaders, at home and abroad, uphill, down dale, in the streets of Nigeria, and in the residence of its advocates. The Egbe Omo Oduduwa is the enemy of Nigeria. it must be Crushed to the earth there is no going back until the fascist organization of Sir Adeyemo Alakija has been dismembered (Adebanwi 2014, p. 54).

Although some Egbe members and their properties were attacked apparently in obedience to the instigation of the West African Pilot yet there is nothing in the Egbe aims and methods to attain them that contain anything that can remotely be regarded as hostile to the Igbo, the NCNC, or Its supporters (Adebanwi 2014).

So why did the Igbo in general and Nnamdi Azikiwe, In particular, give the news of the formation of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa such a hostile reception and this in

a situation where a similar Igbo society was already two years in existence. Since no concrete evidence has come to light, it may well be that the Igbo ethnic leadership preferred to see the Yoruba as they were -disunited and engrossed in mutual recrimination and condemnation - while the Igbo were uniting themselves and rallying around their leader, Nnamdi Azikiwe. Intemperate utterances by aspirants to leadership positions in Nigeria have contributed to ethnic hostility in Nnamdi Azikiwe took the lead in this. He did not hide his impression of the NYM leadership. As far as he saw them, they were lackeys of imperialism. Not surprisingly a press war was between the *West African Pilot* and the *Daily Service* – the mouthpieces of Nnamdi Azikiwe and the NYM leadership ensued.

The Egbe was roped in from 1947 when it was launched in Lagos. The situation degenerated to a point that in July and September extremists on both sides had bought up all the available machetes in Lagos markets in anticipation of the eruption of ethnic violence (Olaniyi 2011). Particularly very unhelpful to the growth of a single nationalism in Nigeria was a part of Nnamdi Azikiwe's address to the first Igbo State Conference in 1949; to the effect that

...the God of Africa has especially created the Ibo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of the ages. The martial prowess of the Ibo nation ... has enabled them not only to conquer others but, also to adapt themselves to the role of preserver... the Ibo nation cannot shirk its responsibility (Usuanlele & Ibhawoh 2017, p. 239).

While this address almost destroyed Nnamdi Azikiwe's nationalist credentials, it also made impossible any meaningful cooperation between him and Yoruba leaders particularly Obafemi Awolowo who had, since the late 1930s on account of pro-Igbo ethnic biases, lost faith in Nnamdi Azikiwe's aspirations to the leadership of Nigerian nationalism.

The Rise of Political Parties and Azikiwe's Legislative Ambition: Political parties emerged in Nigeria largely in anticipation of the promulgation of the 1945 Richards constitution which came into effect in 1947 (Undiyaundeye 2011). The first political party to emerge in the early 1940s was the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC). It was an amalgam of two trade unions, two political parties, four literary societies, eight professional bodies, eleven social clubs, and one hundred and one ethnic unions (Justice 1977). It had four objectives. With the death of Herbert Macaulay the erstwhile president in 1946, Nnamdi Azikiwe was elected president of the party for a three-year term "and given the power to appoint all other officers of the National Council (Justice 1977).

On the other hand, the Action Group [AG] party was formed on March 29, 1951, out of the Egbe Omo Oduduwa (Ayoade 1985). It will appear that its formation was hastened by several factors. First, the NCNC formed the Yoruba Federal Union for the sole purpose of countering the Egbe appeal; which action made the Egbe supporters respond to the effect that the Yoruba Federal Union was a design by the Igbo to keep the Yoruba divided politically while the Igbo were united as a group

behind Nnamdi Azikiwe⁴³. Second, the NYM now old was clearly no match for the NCNC in Lagos on the eve of the 1951 general elections. The Yoruba elite was now faced with "the depressing likelihood of an NCNC government coming to power in the Western Region". Hence the Egbe had to be used as a nucleus of new political opposition to the NCNC (Ayoade 1985). The Action Group was formed and led by Obafemi Awolowo. The two political and ethnic adversaries now found themselves eyeball to eyeball in the full glare of the world.

The 1951 general elections were conducted in the Western Region by the end of 1951.

The NCNC did well in Lagos winning all the five seats allocated into the Western House of Assembly from where two members were to be elected into the Central Legislature. The successful candidates, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Adeleke Adedoyin, A. B. Olorun-Nimbe, H. P. Adebola and T. O. S. Benson who replaced J. O Coker - presented themselves for the election (Ayoade 1985). The House elected Olorun-Nimbe and Adeleke Adedoyin neither of whom agreed to step down for their party leader, Nnamdi Azikiwe Why? With regard to A. B. Olorun-Nimbe, he bluntly refused to step down even though he had enjoyed such a favour and had been offered an uncreative appointment as Lagos Town Clerk (Ayoade 1985). So what about Adeleke Adedoyin? Did the AG "mischievously" elect him as Richard L. Sklar alleges? First, he had been chosen by the party Executive Council to go to the Central Legislature with Nnamdi Azikiwe. The pressure was brought to bear on him for and against his resignation in favour of his party leader. Adeleke Adedoyin stepped down only to reverse himself on January 12, 1952; and withdrew the letter of his resignation because such an act was viewed as monstrous in local circles. It would shatter Prince Adedoyin's prestige as a man and as a politician. But there is much confidence locally that such a reasonable man cannot be forced to such is meaningful decision (Ayoade 1985). It will appear that Adeleke Adedoyin for reasons of his career as a politician decided on his own to deny his party leader the opportunity to go to the Central Legislature. It was a cruel coincidence that his personal decision fell in line with the desire of the Action Group as a party. As a consequence of his failure to go to the Central Legislature from the Western House of Assembly, Nnamdi Azikiwe found it very difficult to place trust " ...in Yoruba politicians In an atmosphere of ancestral tensions (Sklar 2015, p. 76).

This was the state of Yoruba - Igbo rivalry when the 1959 general elections were conducted. The three major parties the Northern People's Congress (NPC), NCNC and AG respectively won 134,81 and 73 seats in the Central Legislature (House of Representatives). Two comfortable coalition governments in a 312 member House were either and NPC-NCNC or an NPC AG which would have given the AG the chance to some of its manifestoes (Adebaniwa · 2014). NCNC-AG cognition was also possible but with a slim majority of only four seats. Even though Obafemi Awolowo approached Nnamdi Azikiwe on the matter, yet the latter stunned the proposal preferring to team up with the NPC Instead. As result, Nigeria and Nigerians were

denied a chance to witness a peaceful transition of power. Southern politicians would have had the chance to rule Nigeria and in the process lay to rest the colonial implanted view that only the Hausa-Fulani should rule. Third, Obafemi Awolowo and his AG that were famed for their organizational skits would have brought these to bear in the governance of the polity. As a result of Obafemi Awolowo's incarceration on charges of treasonable felony, his AG party did very poorly in the 1964 general elections and its alliance neighbours the NCNC, NEPU and UMBC in the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA) were unable to get a working coalition (Adebanwi, 2014). The Nigerian National Alliance (NINA) - a fusion of the NPC and breakaway faction of the AG under Samuel Akintola was able to form a coalition government. It is interesting that with Obafemi Awolowo out of the way, the NCNC now saw a need to team up with the AG (Tijani 1998).

The military staged a coup d'état on January 15, 1966. This first coup, d'etat created more problems for Nigeria and not surprisingly, a second coup d'etat was staged on July 29, 1966, which brought Yakubu Gowon, then a Lieutenant colonel to power. On assumption of power, he released Obafemi Awolowo from prison as he had promised (Nwalu 2020). He released Obafemi Awolowo because, according to him, "...the country needs the wealth of your experience" (Nwalu 2020, p. 54) Gowon did not only release Obafemi Awolowo from prison; he also appointed him to two critical offices, vice chairman of the Federal Executive Council (FEC) and Minister of Finance (Nwalu 2020).

OBAFEMI AWOLOWO AND THE CIVIL WAR

Immediately he was sworn into office Obafemi Awolowo went into action to help diffuse the political tension that hung over the country. Yakubu Gowon invited him to the Ad-Hoc constitutional conference on September 10, 1966, along with other leaders (Tamuno 1970). The next day at the meeting of the Western Leaders of Thought he was unanimously elected "Leader of the Yorubas (Akpan 2014). It was in this capacity that he took the Western delegation to the conference. The conference had hardly settled down on its resumption on September 20, 1966, when news of renewed pogroms forced it to postpone its deliberations indefinitely (Tamuno 1970). Obafemi Awolowo was bent on keeping the Igbo in the Nigerian federation and this explains why he led the National Reconciliation Committee to Enugu and held discussions with the military governor, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu on May 6 and 7, 1967 (Akpan 2014). Which talks did little if anything the diffuse the tension. Did Obafemi Awolowo betray the Igbo during the civil war as it is popularly believed in Igboland? From available evidence, the Igbo were not deceived to wage war against Nigerians by Obafemi Awolowo. On May 1, 1967, in an address to a meeting of the Western Leaders of Thought in Ibadan he argued that If the Eastern Region is allowed by acts of omission or commission to secede from or opt-out of Nigeria, then the Western Region and Lagos must also stay out of the Federation (Akpan 2014).

This part of the address has been the subject of the allegation of Obafemi Awolowo's betrayal of the Igbo as Chinua Achebe sarcastically argued "... But somebody said: if A is allowed to get out of Nigeria I would follow. Do you remember who said that"⁶³. It was the Eastern governor who did nothing to reciprocate the federal government's actions to diffuse the crisis. According to Akpan (2014), Ojukwu left the members of the National Reconciliation Committee in no doubt that the meeting place between the people of the East and those of the North "...would be the battlefield. I do not know whether the visiting team from Lagos grasped the full significance of that ominous statement. Cyprian Ekwensi also notes that it was Ojukwu who treated the federal government's reconciliation actions with "contempt, levity, and apathy (Ekwensi 1976). Obafemi Awolowo was therefore not wrong to argue that

I am personally satisfied that the acts of omission we feared had not materialized and that the federal military government acting on the recommendation of the National Conciliation Committee in the closing days of May this year did all that was possible in the circumstances to placate the Eastern leaders... (Awolowo 1960, p. 95).

Hostilities of the Nigerian civil war began on June 6, 1967. With the invasion of the Midwest region and calls by *Radio Biafra* that the Yoruba in the Nigerian Army should desert and report at its army headquarters in Enugu; and take up arms to liberate themselves from "Hausa, Fulani domination with threats of capturing Lagos having swiftly got to the border town of Ore, Obafemi Awolowo had to reverse himself, and urged the Yoruba to enlist massively in the Nigerian Army to fight and defend Yorubaland. So the civil war was fought and won on January 15, 1970 (Justice 1977).

Obafemi Awolowo apart from being grateful to Yakubu Gowon for his release from prison was charged as minister of finance to fund the war effort, and nobody expected Obafemi Awolowo who had, all his life been a Nigerian patriot to support its dismemberment. And on this score he and Nnamdi Azikiwe were together in spite of their ethnic hostility Nnamdi Azikiwe fled the rebel enclave just before its collapse and so if anybody is to be of betrayal, Nnamdi Azikiwe should be the one.

CONCLUSION

Obafemi Awolowo and Nnamdi Azikiwe by sheer accident of history and hard work rose to the leadership of their ethnic nations. Unfortunately for Nigeria, they spent most of their time fighting themselves and in the process converted themselves and their parties into pawns on the chessboard of Nigerian politics. While the NPC planted itself firmly at the apex of Nigerian governments, the country was denied the replication of the development strides that were a lot of the Western Region, good governance, and political stability.

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