

Obafemi Awolowo on Dialectic, Education and Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Awolowo develops a theory of dialectic which rests on the principle of social justice, fairness and equity. It is a departure from the Hegelian dialectic which thrives on contradiction. For Awolowo, dialectic is about love, hence it works with the basic rule of life, namely, that good begets good and evil begets evil. In his analysis, Awolowo sees love as a basic rule of life for leaders who are desirous of achieving effective governance translatable to development. In his belief, good governance flows from an adherence to this basic principle and it is apparent in the leader's readiness to be transparent and accountable for their actions in power. In essence, Awolowo's dialectic is about the leader's willingness to pursue a course of action that is capable of bringing about social justice, equity and fairness in society. Awolowo sees a symmetrical relation between education and political consciousness, hence his belief that mass education is necessary for the development of political culture in Nigeria. For him an illiterate person is a pawn in the hands of his fellow men/women; however, with education he becomes liberated. This paper attempts to show that there is strength in Awolowo's dialectic; hence it could contribute to the ongoing debates on good governance and development in Nigeria and Africa.

Key words: Dialectic; Development; Immutable law; Universal mind; Good governance; Leadership; Mental magnitude

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INTRODUCTION

Shortly after the colonial administrations wound up in Africa, the continent's political climate was characterized by conflict of interests. This was engendered by the excesses of the politicians whose interests conflicted with the interests of their various countries. It was a political development imbued with an unusual drive for materialism. Politicians were driven by their appetites and egoistic passions. The existing political order was devoid of social justice, fairness and equity. This was the situation when Awolowo came into the political scene in Nigeria. His attempt to evolve a new political order meant to aid the socio-political development of Nigeria led him to his dialectic and the theory of mental magnitude. The establishment of this new political order was premised on a universal education policy, since for him there could be no social justice, fairness and equity where a large number of Nigerians was illiterate. This paper is a mirror held up to examine Awolowo's exposition of his dialectic with its basic principle of justice, fairness and equity. The paper examines how the dialectic principle is related directly to his theory of governance, and come to shape his educational thought and human development. On the whole, it concludes that Awolowo's dialectic can contribute to the current debates on how to evolve good governance in Africa.

1. OBAFEMI AWOLOWO'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

Obafemi Awolowo was born into a peasant family in Nigeria. He was very young when his father died; hence, he was thrown into abject poverty. He was, therefore,

faced with the challenges of how to continue his elementary education. Awolowo's experience with poverty dictated his empathy for poor people. The experience enabled him to understand why some children from poor homes could not afford to continue with their education, an experience that dictated his disposition to free and universal education policy and a related political system in Nigeria.

Three things seem to underlie Awolowo's choice of political institution, first the qualities of leaders engaged to lead any society, and second the best political system that can guarantee the well-being of an average citizen within such society. Third, that which he considers to be fundamental to basic development, is education which constitutes the edifice socio-political development in any society. In the area of political institution, Awolowo identifies himself with socialism, a choice that is informed by his belief that only socialism can improve the lives of the poor people in Nigeria and by extension Africa. He does not see any hope in the adoption of the existing economic system (capitalist system), which was inherited from the colonial administration. For him, capitalism by nature is exploitative; it was evidenced in the economic policy of the colonial government. In his verdict, Awolowo pronounces capitalism to be evil because, according to him, it thrives on the sweat of the poor masses. Awolowo's contention, therefore, is that capitalist system operates in such a way that the poor become poorer and the rich get richer; hence there may be the need for Nigeria and African countries (as the case may be) to pursue a new social order that would guarantee social justice, equity and fairness in governance.

The choice of socialism is borne out of the need to evolve a viable political system that guarantees social justice and equality. He thinks socialism is opposed to the exploitative tendencies which capitalism represents. Flirting with capitalism would be a hindrance to the establishment of social justice, fair play and equity in the society, a notion considered to be fundamental to his theory of dialectic. As Awolowo (1981b, p.67) has remarked "my own concept of socialism is entirely different from communism and the Marxian concept of socialism. In my view, the economic forces at work, in any country and in the world at large must be brought under complete control, coordinated, tamed, and humanized for the benefit of all." Thus, in Awolowo's view, the essence of governance is to satisfy the needs of the people, and this is best achieved when the resources of the state are used for the benefit of all.

It is necessary to indicate that Awolowo's idea of socialism differs from the Marxist's especially in the area of methodology. Basically, both Awoism and Marxism rest on the principle that the essence of governance is to bring about fairness, social justice and equity in the state. Awolowo does not tell us how to establish this social justice and fairness in the face of his admission that his

planned socialist system embodied private participation in economic matters. For Awolowo (1981a), the public and private sectors of the economy can exist side by side, since the control exerted by Government will be enough to regulate the activities of the individuals within the economy. It is not clear how he expects social justice to exist without some individuals taking advantage of their economic power, even when those in government too have their interests to protect.

Awolowo sees leadership as a major issue in governance. For him, a state deserves to have leaders whose major concern will be to promote social justice, engender cooperation and friendship among different social groups in the society. To accomplish this, Awolowo contends that Nigeria and perhaps African countries need leaders who can bring their appetite and desire under the control of *reason*, that is, makes reasonable sense of their actions. This notion rests on the belief that only leaders whose interest is subsumed under the interest of the people can promote peace and social harmony. Leaders like this have been able to abstain from alcoholic beverages and tobacco, and vanquish the emotions of greed and fear. Achieving this is a necessary step to what Awolowo calls the regime of mental magnitude.

Awolowo has his antecedent in Plato and that is why he defines his own view of the State in a way he thinks preserved whatever is of value in Plato. Like Plato he identifies three classes of people in the society, namely, the educated class which consists of professional people, teachers and clerks; the enlightened class, this consists of traders and artisans and the ignorant masses (Adegbesan, 1987, p.315). It thus appears to Awolowo that members of these classes are often guided by their appetitive tendencies and desire. So, armed with this notion, he contends that those who aspire to lead should be able to bring these appetitive tendencies under the control of *reason*, a culture which enables them to cultivate self-discipline and promote good governance. This notion of good leadership equally requires the ability to avoid negative emotions e.g. anger, indulgence in wrong type of food and drink, and excessive or immoral craving for sex. Popper will probably argue that Awolowo's attributes of leadership vis-à-vis the institution of good governance in the state lack a logical lustre. To Popper, it thus appears that in Awolowo's theory of governance, cultivation of positive instincts by leaders is a sufficient condition for good governance. Popper like any reasonable person would rather think that the cultivation of these positive instincts alone, as envisaged by Awolowo, may not guarantee good governance.

2. DIALECTIC AND UNIVERSAL MIND IN AWOLOWO'S THOUGHT

The doctrine of dialectic, as a world process, dates back

to Socrates, a Greek Philosopher who is reputed for the use of rigorous and critical method of questioning. Its first use has been ascribed to Zeno, a student of Parmenides (Hoffman, 2005). Dialectic, in its original conception, deals with a technique of questioning and answering that exposes the contradiction in any matter under discussion. Its modern conception has been traced to Hegel who links it with the process of self-development of the Absolute. In his remark, Hook (1994) contends that dialectic is used to explain the art of analysis and investigation of truth and the elimination of falsehood and contradiction by rigorous and critical method of question and answer. On the other hand, The World Encyclopedia (2008, p.1) defines dialectic “as a line of thought...that stresses development through a back and forth movement between opposing propositions.”

Socrates uses the dialectical method successfully in his philosophical tradition. As observed by Berthold-Bond (1993), dialectic is both a method of demonstration and an ontological principle. As an ontological principle, it expresses the development of things from their potentialities to actuality. Inherent in the principle is the notion of negativity, which Hegel clearly demonstrated in his Philosophy of History. According to Hegel (as cited in Berthold, 1993),

‘the nation lives the same life as the individual...in the enjoyment of itself, the satisfaction of being exactly what it desired to be...[and the consequent] abandonment of aspirations,...[the nation slips into a] merely customary life (like the watch wound up and going on of itself, into an activity without opposition). And this is what brings on its natural death... Thus perish individuals, and thus perish nations, by a natural death.’

Hegel’s explanation is that an individual or a nation needs opposition to be able to make a necessary progress. It says that mankind can only reach its highest spiritual consciousness (make progress) through endless self-perpetuating struggle between ideals, and the synthesizing of opposites.

One basic point about Hegel’s conception of dialectic is that it refers to both thought and being, a tradition he inherits from Kant. To Hegel, dialectic is a transition (in both thought and being) brought about by negativity. As a mode of thought, dialectical structure of thought reflects the dialectical structure of the world. In this regard, thought and the world reflect the same structural framework.

Hegel’s dialectic rests on his ontological account of contradiction, clearly explained by Inwood (2003). To him, Hegel’s dialectic says that there is an identity (that man is identical to God by being rational), *thesis*, the identity cannot sustain itself, hence, it breeds opposition to itself (sinks in natural instincts), *antithesis*. It makes efforts to return to an earlier identity (rationality i.e. his identical nature with God), *synthesis*. Hegel applies the same principle to the evolution of state when he says

that the unity of the family proves inadequate on its own *thesis*. Thus it gives rise to its opposite or negation (civil society) *antithesis* involving individuals who develop their own personalities and interests. In turn, it proves defective and requires for its completion the higher unity of the state, *synthesis*. Thus, Hegel’s dialectic is premised on constant conflict of opposites.

Hegel’s dialectic revolves around the Absolute Spirit who struggles to realize its perfect state, a state he identifies with reason and freedom. In Awolowo’s case, the Universal mind or Immutable law underlies the material world and the subjective world of thoughts, ideas and ideals. It manifests itself in our thought, actions and deeds, and helps to explain the fundamental object of human interaction. Thus Awolowo’s dialectic is based on thought and this is linked to the immutable law or universal mind. In his analysis, thought can be good or evil. Instead of contradictions which typify Hegel’s dialectic, Awolowo sees positive relation (which manifests in *love*) as the linchpin of the universal mind. This notion of thought explains the basic principles which define human relationship with both the lower and higher organism. Awolowo develops a different notion of dialectic that rests on identical terms, namely, evil begets evil and good begets good. So in him, there is no need for contradiction to be able to explain dialectical processes. It is a matter of like terms acting on each other. Thus, in Awolowo’s dialectic, the object of thought is *love*, a basic element behind the principle of social justice, equity and fairness.

In spite of Awolowo’s insistence that his dialectic does not involve the notion of negativity, a strand of contradiction is discernible in his thought. It is clear that in his dialectic, Awolowo sees accountability, transparency and the like as the mainstream of political order which may constitute the *thesis* while selfishness, greed and so on constitute a negation of this order. The conflict between man’s natural instincts like greed, impulse is resolved when these greed and selfish acts are overcome and *love* which manifests in social justice, fairness and equity is attained. Love then becomes a quality that the state or family must aspire to have. Just like the state aspires to reach its perfection when it has freedom, morality and rationality in Hegelian dialectic, Awolowo’s perfect state is achieved when the state and its parts attain a perfect state of love. Love becomes the quintessence of state and human interaction. This notion of love to Hook (1994) is nothing but “an artificially conceived ideal which has no root in the rich loam of daily experience.” Awolowo’s conception of love in this respect, which may not be clear to Hook, is that he (Awolowo) intends to avoid what he calls ‘secular social disequilibrium in the society’ arising from the capitalists’ greed and selfishness.

In Hegel’s dialectic, God manifests his plan through men and matters; a tradition Awolowo reiterates in his explanation of the universal mind. For Awolowo

(1968, p.206), “we believe in God, and believe that He is the Creator of the universe. We believe that He is the Universal mind which permeates and pervades all things.” The notion of creation includes the love of God for us. So, if God is the universal mind from whom love emanates, then human beings need to manifest this love in their attitudes to others. This is the height of Awolowo’s spiritual depth. Makinde (2007) sees Awolowo propagating the doctrine of mental magnitude and the idea of spiritual depth, which involves the notion of God and love. In his belief, Awolowo sees these values (mental magnitude and spiritual depth) of human existence as the only insurance against greed and naked selfishness. The point then is that cultivation of the regime of mental magnitude and spiritual depth is an inroad to a just and egalitarian society. It is not clear why Awolowo has to bring in God and Love to be able to appeal to the sensibility of the political class on good governance. Awolowo does not want to appeal to Karl Marx too because his notion of God as a viable medium to overcome human crises in Nigeria has no precedent in Marx. So Marx’s dialectical materialism will only be meaningful where it attempts to solve the plight of workers. Even where he appeals to God for help he must be sure of where to begin the judgment as the evil practices in the different sectors of the economy in Nigeria are not perpetrated by politicians alone. Today in Nigeria, ministry officials constitute themselves as cartels in corrupt practices. Thus, Awolowo probably needs to appeal to God too to imprint in the minds of these officials the spirit of love in order to solve the problem of corrupt practices among them. Nevertheless, Awolowo anchors his good governance on adherence to the principle of dialectic and the cultivation of mental magnitude by leaders.

The principle behind Awolowo’s mental magnitude is that it is necessary to allow reason (that is, reflective thinking) to control human instincts and emotions that make us behave like animals. Thus, the theory of mental magnitude is about a person’s ability to subvert the human desires that crave selfish interest and crass materialism. The theory is borne out of Awolowo’s observation that most leaders lack the basic ingredients of leadership, namely, *self-discipline and rational behaviour*. He shares this view with Plato who has earlier observed that the interests of the politicians are sometimes in conflict with the interest of the people, especially when the politicians’ desire is simply to satisfy their needs. Plato sees the link between this desire and the politicians’ instincts and emotions, hence his belief that *reason* should be allowed to control those instincts and emotions which push them to crave material things.

3. AWOLOWO’S DIALECTIC, EDUCATION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Three things seem to inform Awolowo’s conviction that

Nigeria needs a universal and compulsory education at the primary and secondary levels. First, there is the need for the less privilege people to be assisted to have the basic education; since education, for him, is not the prerogative of any class. In this respect, education is for rural and urban, poor and rich children. Second, education is seen as a process of self-realisation and self-fulfilment. By self-realisation we mean the ability to develop one’s distinctive capacities as a man. According to Neilsen (1976), to “realize oneself is the final end of all moral activity. It defines what is to constitute ‘the good life’ and what is to count as ‘as a good man’.” Such education in Awolowo’s belief will help to control the instinctive urges of those who aspire to lead the state thereby ensure self-discipline. Awolowo is not sure if these urges can be put under control given the affected group (the political class), nevertheless, he thinks we may be able to achieve it if this group allows reason to control their actions. The question still remains whether we can ever forge a link between ‘reason’ and emotions, feelings and so on. Third, any country that aspires to develop optimally must ensure that it overcomes the problem of ignorance, illiteracy, poverty and disease among its citizens. To Awolowo (1976), the developed nations ensure an even development of their economy through the education of their citizens. Supporting this idea, Fafunwa (1967) contends that any nation that aspires to develop to the optimal level should ensure that its masses do not remain ignorant and disease ridden. For him, illiterate members of society are mere pawns in the hands of their fellow citizens.

The essence of Awolowo’s educational theory is to achieve human development; a development which is symmetrically related to his dialectic. Awolowo’s dialectic embodies the principle of equity, justice and fairness. It is interesting to note that Awolowo ties this dialectic principle to human resource development, an issue that is connected to the eradication of illiteracy, ignorance and disease. Human capital theory supports Awolowo’s contention on the relationship between education and development. The theory rests on the premise that investment in human beings is a way of increasing the overall economic productivity of a nation (Phillips and Schweisfurth, 2006). Thus, education is seen as a means to developing skills, knowledge and a motivation for economic productivity. Awolowo’s educational theory, therefore, rests on the belief that education is essential for the development of skills, knowledge and motivation required for human development, and a liberating force against ignorance and disease. Thus, the introduction of Universal Primary Education in 1955 in Western Nigeria aiming at eradicating ignorance, illiteracy and disease is meant to achieve social transformation translatable to human development.

A startling report by the UNDP (2007) on Human development for the year 2007/2008 indicates that African countries form the bulk of countries with low

enrolment rate under Low Human Development index. Senegal tops the list of these countries, followed closely by Nigeria with Sierra Leone coming last on the list. It is the same situation with African countries' commitment to education which sees Sierra Leone coming first from the rear. The highest percentage of the entire budget Nigeria has given to education in the past few years is 13 percent, whereas as revealed by Nigeria's Central Bank' Governor in a recent newspapers report 25 percent of the annual budget was allocated to the Nigerian legislative arm of Government (The Nation, Nigerian Newspaper, March 2011, p.23). It strongly indicates the disposition of African leaders, especially those from the sub-Saharan Africa, to development of education in their countries. Since funding is inadequate, provision of infrastructural facilities to schools remains a problem, making it difficult for Nigeria to achieve a balance between education and development.

Awolowo identifies selfishness, greed and corruption as the major constraints against education and human development in Africa. In order to overcome this human development problem, Awolowo sees the need to evolve an education policy that caters for human development project, an experiment he tested in Nigeria in 1955. Thus, Awolowo's efforts in the area of education are predicated on the belief that "the level of development of education can itself determine the level of development of an economy" (Obanya, 2004, p.8).

Much as Phillips and Schweisfurth (2006, p.70) clearly support such link between education and economic development they still believe that sometimes there may be some other reasons, for instance, why productivity may not be related to education. Here the family and personal connection are seen as portentous variables that may sometimes vitiate the education and economic development link. The point indeed is that, in Nigeria, much as the family and personal factor can bring about business success the same business can fail for lack of organizational control that may reflect in the area of financial recklessness. Experience has shown that many businesses in Nigeria collapsed because of the education factor, as owners of these business enterprises lack the education skills required to manage their expansive businesses. Their associates who sometimes include their own children often collude to run down such businesses. The returns which education provides seem to be the motivating factor in Awolowo's mass education programme in Nigeria.

Thus, Awolowo's introduction of Universal Primary Education in Western Nigeria, therefore, is a response to the belief that education is not an exclusive preserve of the rich, a belief which harps on the need for fairness, justice and equity in sharing social goods such as education. The greatest challenge Awolowo believes Nigeria is facing and which continues to militate against its development is lack of access to education by a large number of Nigerian children. The various administrations that succeed the

colonial administrations in Nigeria tailor their education policies to the policies of the administrations they inherited. Education, in this regard, becomes elitist, as those who can afford to send their children to schools are either government officials or people with business connection in government. In 1976, Gen Obasanjo attempts to break this elitist education policy by the introduction of Universal Primary Education. However, right from outset the objective of the programme was defeated, because it was launched basically to remove the gulf which exists in the area of education between Northern and Southern Nigeria. Hence, its transformative agenda was overshadowed by its political objective. Nevertheless, Awolowo's Free Universal Primary Education which he introduces in Nigeria in 1955 clearly demonstrates that "education...decreases the likelihood that people will be poor." It is a statement like this that Awolowo turns into a principle that guides his disposition to mass education for national development.

4. CRITIQUE OF AWOLOWO'S DIALECTIC AND DEVELOPMENT

It is necessary to understand why Awolowo comes up with his own theory of dialectic in spite of his closeness to Plato and Hegel on the theory of state and leadership. Awolowo is particularly irked by government's economic policies which place the destiny of the masses at the feet of the wealthy individuals. Like Karl Marx, Awolowo believes that the conflict between the forces of production and social relations in capitalism is bound to generate a crisis of greater magnitude, and eventually lead to the demise of capitalism. When it happens Awolowo envisages a system transformation which will produce such values as social justice, fairness and equity. Awolowo (1981a) is not sure if the total control of the forces of production by government will help to alleviate the problems of the workers, hence he advocates private participation in the structure of the economy. He thinks government's regulations of the activities of individuals within the economy will help to render ineffective the selfish tendencies likely to be associated with the various interest groups in the state. Awolowo knows why it has been difficult for government to arrest corruption in Nigeria in spite of the activities of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), its anti-corruption agencies. It is this same government Awolowo thinks will regulate the activities of individuals in the economy with success; though he has had course, in the past, to chose the option of using God (in a difficult situation) especially when it becomes necessary to appeal to the moral conscience of some individuals. He may decide to do the same with the private investors to jettison their profit maximisation policy in favour of equity and fairness in their activities.

It thus appears that Awolowo is more concerned with a system which expresses an impassionate moral protest against the role of self-interest in economic policies. It is this notion that informs his theories of dialectic and mental magnitude which invariably defines his attributes of leadership and good governance.

Awolowo, indeed, explores attribution theory of leadership to argue for visionary leadership in Nigerian political landscape. Awolowo invokes the attributes of rationality and *self-discipline* in leadership as an essential factor in governance. In his belief, a leader becomes rational when his actions are guided by reflective thought—he decides on the best programmes for the people and every step he takes has the imprint of accountability and transparency. It should be noted that Awolowo's appeal to leader's self-discipline and rational behaviour in government is informed by the attitudes of some of our leaders.

Nevertheless, Awolowo seems to have been carried away by the belief that governance is all about discipline and rational behaviour, and the taming of negative instincts and emotions. He does not envisage a situation where a disciplined leader may turn out to be a bad leader because he lacks visionary power. This may happen where a leader is unable to initiate ideas for political and economic reforms, understand the strings that tie global issues sometimes with domestic ones, pursue policies intelligently and initiate reforms where necessary for the purpose of transforming his country, and many others. Awolowo seems to see beyond this level since for him service to the people is the epitome of governance, and this can only be done in an atmosphere that harbours the principle of social justice, equity and fairness.

The principle of social justice, fairness and equity underlies the foundation of Awolowo's dialectic. Thus, his dialectic embodies the presence of Universal mind (Absolute Spirit, in Hegel) in action. It espouses the golden rule: love your neighbour as yourself, and rules out any interaction with a system that harbours exploitation and selfishness. The reason he embraces socialism whose principle he thinks rests on love.

Awolowo's departure either from Hegelian or Marxian tradition must have been informed by his theocratic disposition to governance. His inability to resolve the ideological conflict between Hegel and Marx does not in any way invalidate his belief that dialectic is not always about conflict or contradiction. If Zeno's conception of dialectic could differ from Socrates' and Hegel's conception differs from Marx and a varieties of conceptions have emerged since Hegel, Awolowo's conception should be seen from its strength especially as it relates to the problem of development in Nigeria and African continent. It says that with love of the people at heart, leaders should strive to be transparent, accountable and focus.

CONCLUSION

Two things become apparent in Awolowo's exposition of his dialectic theory. First, Awolowo sees a link between education and development, and second he believes that good governance is about serving the people. In this regard, service is supposed to be based on the principle of justice, fairness and equity. This is where Awolowo's dialectic theory comes in, namely, serving the people with the combination of love and dedication and avoid indulging in selfish and corrupt acts that can hinder the development of the state. Dialectic in Awolowo's thought, therefore, is a reflection on the principle of fairness, justice, transparency, and accountability.

Oke has a reservation for theories like those of dialectic and mental magnitude by Awolowo (Oke, 2006, p.337). Oke thinks reminiscent of such theories can be found in the works of Nyerere's Ujamaa, Senghor's Negritude, Nkrumah's Consciencism and Sekou Toure's Re-Africanisation. Oke does not tell us whether in the application of these theories they failed to accomplish their task. Nevertheless, the difference which I think is probably hidden to Oke is that Awolowo's passion for Africa's development has been demonstrated in his invitation of God into Africa's affairs. This is the main reason he brings in God to strengthen his argument, considering the golden rule that says 'love your neighbors as yourself.' It is one of the laws of God which harps on the principle of justice and fairness. Indeed, Awolowo's dialectic theory is about this principle of justice, fairness, and equity and the view that this principle should be held sacrosanct in the attempts to evolve economic and political change in Africa. This paper tries to show that Awolowo's theory of dialectic will not only enrich the existing literature in the area of education for human development in Africa but serve as a guide to leaders desirous of making fruitful impacts in the lives of their people.

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