

**AWOLOWO'S
CONCEPTION OF
EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY**



**TONY IDOWU ALADEJANA
A.F. OYELADE**

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AWO'S BIOGRAPHY

Chief Obafemi Awolowo was born on March 6, 1909 in Ikenne, Ogun State, to Chief David Sopolu and Mrs. Mary Efunyela Awolowo. He attended Wesleyan School, Imo, Abeokuta, Wesley College, Ibadan and the University College, London. He enrolled at the Wesley College, Ibadan, for a four-year teacher training course. In 1926 he started as a teacher, became a stenographer in 1928 and later joined the Daily Times of Nigeria in 1934 as a reporter-in-training. He left the Daily Times and became a businessman engaging in transportation and produce buying. He helped to establish the Nigerian Produce Trader's Association, Ibadan; the Ibadan Branch of the Nigerian Youth Movement (as secretary in 1940); the Wesley Guild, Ibadan; and the Trade Union Congress of Nigeria.

In 1937, he got married to Hannah Idowu Dideolu Adelana. He left for the United Kingdom for a degree in law in 1944. He was called to the Inner Temple Bar, London in 1946. He founded the Egbe Omo Oduduwa which formed the basis for his defunct political party, Action Group, in 1951. He became the first Premier of Western Region in 1955. Chief Awolowo as Premier of the West was the first to start the free Universal Primary Education. During his tenure, he initiated the establishment of the Western Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation, the Liberty Stadium, Ibadan and the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University). He was re-appointed Premier and stayed until 1959.

He resigned on being elected to the Federal House

of Representatives leaving his post to Chief Samuel Ladoke Akintola. He was prominent in the delegations that travelled to the UK to negotiate Nigeria's independence. He was in all of the teams that went to the 1953, 1954, 1957 and 1959 constitutional conferences that ushered in Nigerian's independence. He became the leader of the opposition in the Federal Legislature in 1960.

As a result of the political rift in the Action Group, a state of emergency was declared by the Federal Government led by Alhaji Tafawa Balewa. Consequently, on November 2, 1962, he was arraigned with other members of the party for treasonable felony. In 1963, he was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment. He served at the Calabar Prison and was released on August 3, 1966 by General Yakubu Gowon after several changes at the top in the central government following a particular turbulent period in Nigeria's history. He was eventually made Federal Commissioner for Finance and Vice-Chairman, Federal Executive Council. In June 1971, he resigned his government appointment for private legal practice and politics.

He formed the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) in 1978. The party listed its cardinal programme of free education at all levels, free medical services, integrated rural development and free employment for all. In 1979 he contested the presidential election on the platform of the UPN. He was declared loser but he contested the election up to the Supreme Court where the FEDECO results were reaffirmed. He was awarded the Grand Commander of the Federal Republic (GCFR), the highest national award

in the land, by President Shehu Shagari at an impressive ceremony in 1983. In August the same year, he had a second crack at the nation's highest office in the second republic but failed to win. He retired to his Ikenne home.

He held the traditional titles of: Asiwaju of Ijebu-Remo, Losi of Ikenne, Lisa of Ijebu, Apesin of Oshogbo, Odole of Ife and so on. He was awarded the following honorary titles:

- LLD (Hons) University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Doctor of Science, University of Ife, Ile-Ife
- Doctor of Letters, University of Lagos,
- LLD, University of Ibadan, Ibadan.

He was also Chancellor of University of Ife and Ahmadu Bello University respectively.

On May 9, 1987 he died peacefully at his Ikenne home.

INTRODUCTION

Chief Obafemi Awolowo is still very highly regarded by many people, even in death. In death, he is still alive. The 1987 and 1988 Almanac commemorating his passing away quoted him thus: "Although my desire to serve has not been fully realized here on earth ... I have a strong conviction in life-after-death and the possibility of my continuing to serve even after death". He is also alive in his eternal sleep to remind us about death. Awolowo is particularly alive as an educator and as a politician. Thus, his popular pet name: AWO. He is alive in the minds and hearts of those who view education as the live-wire of existence and the gateway to self-awareness and development. Awo embarked on his free education scheme to warrant equal opportunity so that individuals could participate fully in the Nigerian political democracy and be committed to that democracy. Without any doubt, he realized that democracy does not provide any special reasons for valuing education. But he realized fully that without free educational opportunity, many Nigerians will continue to survive in the state of nature. That means that the problems posed by the lack of (free) education will continue to be a factor, especially for participatory democracy.

Awolowo's educational scheme could be said to be politically motivated. Despite that, he meant well. He believed that through the free educational opportunity, the necessary public forms of understanding would be acquired. According to him, these forms are necessary

for a citizen to be able to perceive, think, feel, imagine, desire and choose. These are necessary for participatory democracy. His belief that educating many citizens is compatible with democratic principles can be understood better if one realizes that without an opportunity for education, certain democratic principles will be difficult to attain. For example, how does someone regarded as an illiterate acquire the necessary education for making intelligent decisions about voting for a candidate or making decisions about complex social and political problems?

Awo was a man of the people, though he evidently belonged to the super bourgeois class. He believed that if the citizens were exposed to equal educational opportunities, a larger measure of equality would be ensured. And the citizens responded enthusiastically to his call since they saw his claim to the principle of equal opportunity as sincere, progressive and challenging. Even with all the attendant problems faced by his free education scheme, his free education policy could be regarded as the most progressive, revolutionary, articulate and endearing programme this country had before independence and, probably, ever since. That is probably why Tai Solarin searched for and could not find someone whom he could respect more than Awo in the Nigerian society. (African Concord, 2 January, 1989, Vol. 2, No. 4, pp. 8-9).

Free education, planned as an opportunity for social upliftment, was conceived by Awo to prepare the people for the hard times ahead. Many Nigerians would have been in worse situations than they are in today had it not

been for Awo's free education policy. As pointed out above, Awolowo and what he stood for are very much alive. He needs to be kept alive because of the richness of his ideas. These ideas need to be collected for further research. The National Conference on "Chief Obafemi Awolowo: the End of An Era" organized by the Obafemi Awolowo University Press, Ile-Ife, in 1987, was the beginning of such efforts. (It will also be recalled that a Foundation has been established for Chief Obafemi Awolowo).

Our book is also a contribution to the dissemination of Awolowo's ideas, particularly in the area of education. We realize that there are still several questions to be asked. Such questions include: (a) Did Awolowo's equal educational opportunity endeavours guarantee equal merit? (b) In a grossly devastated and corrupt country like Nigeria, how can equal educational opportunity function? (c) How can the meaning of the principle be adequately expressed, relating it to the social, political and economic situations of the Nigerian citizens? (d) Did Awolowo's Regime of Mental Magnitude guarantee equal opportunity? These and several other questions need further researches.

There are five chapters in this book. The first discusses the concept of egalitarianism and examines how Awo fits into it. The second chapter deals with the concept of equal educational opportunity with the emphasis on various sub-concepts, such as procedural equality, process equality and achievement equality. The next chapter discusses how Awo's socio-political and philosophical backgrounds paved the way for his educational thought.

The fourth chapter examines the concept of equal educational opportunity in Awo's thought. His concept of it was reduced to mild-achievement equality. The last chapter criticizes his conception of equality of educational opportunity.

This book is intended for the general public, especially those interested in supplementary reading on education as far as Awo's contributions to the discipline is concerned. We wish to express our sincere appreciation to both the academic members of staff of the Department of Educational Foundations and Counselling, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. At the initial stages of this work, we consulted with Professor M.A. Makinde, we wish to thank him for attending to us. Also, Dr. Dipo Fasina gave us free access to his library, we acknowledge his goodwill. We also wish to appreciate the deep interest created in this work by Professor F. O Aladejana.

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His research interests also include works on distinguished Nigerian educationists who have contributed immensely to the growth of education and has published books like: *A Book of Readings*; *The Educational Theory of Tai Solarin*; and *Aliu Babatunde Fafunwa: His Philosophy and Contributions to Nigerian Education*.

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