

INTRODUCTION

The 'I' as 'We': Corporate Agency in an African Lifeworld

*Seasons come, seasons go
 But you remain the constant stanza
 In the national song*

Niyi Osundare, 'For Obafemi Awolowo (Ten Mays Later)'

On 30 August 2012, leaders from all six Yorùbá states in south-western Nigeria and of Yorùbá communities in the Kogi and Kwara states in the Middle Belt region of the country met in Ibadan, the modern political capital of the Yorùbá nation. Under the leadership of Lieutenant General Alani Akinrinade (rtd), the Yorùbá leaders met to discuss the general state of affairs in 'the so-called Nigerian federation', as they described it. The meeting was held against the backdrop of yet another climate of apprehension about the possible disintegration of Nigeria. At its end, the leaders issued a communiqué that articulated their standpoint on the national crisis.

First, they noted that 'Nigeria is, once again, at a critical crossroad[s]', adding that, after more than fifty years of independence and a few years before the centenary of the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates by the British to form colonial Nigeria, 'deep structural issues and Nationality Questions, such as Federalism, Fair and Equitable Revenue Allocation, Security, Free and Fair Elections, State Police and inter-relationship amongst the different nationalities remain unresolved' (*Punch* 2 September 2012). They added that the need for a national dialogue (otherwise called a sovereign national conference) to 'resolve the issues have never been more pressing' because the 'general state of the

Nigerian federation is disturbingly unhealthy'. Also, the Yorùbá leaders observed that 'the failure of the Nigerian Federation to meet the challenge of building a modern multi-ethnic democratic state can be traced to several factors that include: absence of a negotiated constitution by citizens, existence of a constitution that erodes the pre-military federal character of the Nigerian State, political and bureaucratic corruption that seems to arise from a sense of alienation from the state on the part of those expected to provide a sense of belonging and direction for the citizenry, and the menace of religious and cultural intolerance' (ibid.). While stating that the phenomenon of *Boko Haram*, the north-based terrorist group which had declared its mission to Islamize Nigeria, is 'a sign of religious and cultural intolerance that is capable of destroying the unity of the country', the leaders added that 'the best way to sustain unity in a culturally-diverse polity and society is to organize politics and [the] economy of such [a] country on the basis of a federal system of governance'. They concluded that 'Nigeria's cultural diversity is too pronounced for the political elite to pretend that a unitary constitution can be substituted for a federal constitution that is generally designed to respond to diversity and optimize the benefits of diversity for peace and development' (ibid.).

The Yorùbá leaders were asking for Nigeria to move forward by going back to its federalist foundation. Since this foundation was originally locally articulated and promoted as the best form of political architecture for Nigeria by the late leader of the Yorùbá – and the most articulate among Nigerian nationalists on federalism – Chief Ọbáfẹmi Awólówọ, the Yorùbá leaders were also asking Nigeria to return to Awólówọ's ideas on the political organization of Nigeria. The leader of the failed secessionist Republic of Biafra, Chief Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, had described Awólówọ as 'the best president Nigeria never had' (*Daily Times*, 11 May, 1987: 1), and 'a leader of the modern cast' who 'left Nigeria [with] standards which are indelible, standards beside which future aspirations to public leadership can be eternally measured' (Ojukwu 1989, 152).

In a repeatedly quoted statement in his book, *Path to Nigerian Freedom* (1947), Awólówọ, whose image appears above on Nigeria's currency, stated categorically that, 'Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression', adding that 'There are no "Nigerians" in the same sense as there are "English", "Welsh", or "French". The word "Nigerian" is merely a distinctive appellation to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not' (Awólówọ 1947, 47–8).



FIGURE 1. 'Founding Father': Awólówò's image on Nigeria's 100-naira note

After reviewing the differences among the many ethnic nations and groups in Nigeria, he concluded that 'The important point to note is that a federal Constitution is the only thing suitable for Nigeria' (ibid., 52). The ultimate benefit of this, stated Awólówò, was that 'each group [within Nigeria would] make more rapid progress than at present; and as a result the pace of the country as a whole would be considerably quickened towards federal unity' (ibid., 55).

Since his book was published in 1947, Awólówò has been represented as the ur-federalist in Nigeria's history. However, the politics of 'separate progress towards federal unity', which he canvassed, drew and continues to draw the resentment of his political adversaries and the elite of other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. Yet virtually every Nigerian, whether only in word or in deed, has, over the years, become a federalist. However, as demonstrated again in the communiqué cited earlier, the Yorùbá elite continue to be the loudest in the agitation for 'true' federalism in a post-colonial polity which has expressed 'long-standing tensions between [its] ethnic mosaic and its political centralization' (Welch 1995, 635). Awólówò's name, political philosophy, political legacy, his acts of omission and commission are invoked at every point in the crisis of the Nigerian union. In his speech at the 2012 Ọbáfẹmí Awólówò Annual Memorial Lecture organized by the Ọbáfẹmí Awólówò Foundation, northern radical politician and former governor of Kaduna State, Alhaji Balarabe Musa, described Awólówò as a legend 'whose principles can be a guiding light to

present day leaders'. He added that Awólówò 'was the most qualitatively outstanding and memorable legend of Nigerian politics and governance since the 1940s. He was the one whose role in politics and governance could still be a reliable guide for any first time President of Nigeria even though Nigeria lost the opportunity of having Awólówò as its national president' (Kumolu 2012, 1).

At the 30 August meeting, the conferees were reminded by the convener, Akinrinade, that the venue, the Oyo State House of Assembly building, was the same place in which the Western Region House of Assembly had been held when Awólówò was the premier of the region in the late 1950s. This was the place, stated Akinrinade, where Awólówò secured the approval 'for his legendary policies that stood him out as a great leader of his time' (*Nation*, 2 September 2012). They were therefore meeting at the same venue, twenty-seven years after Awólówò's death, to express the Yorùbá's wish to pursue 'self-determination' through 'true' federalism, which, they hoped, would lead to the reconstitution of excellent regional governance, such as was earlier produced under Awólówò's leadership. Years after Awólówò's death, and more than half a century after he left office as the premier of Western Region of Nigeria, the Yorùbá elite continues to regard him as the very symbol of their ethnic nationalism and a shining example of the benefits of self-governance, not only in Nigeria but in all of Africa.

ELITES AND ETHNIC NATIONALISM

Ethnic nationalism has played a profound and lasting role in modern history and it will continue to shape the 21st century (Muller 2008, 19–20). In spite of the largely negative view in which most authors writing on modern ethnicity or ethnic nationalism in Africa cast the phenomenon,¹ some have correctly identified the diversity of identities, such as ethnic identity, to be an asset in the reconstitution of the civic order (Tan, 2006). 'There are good reasons', states the famous historian, Eric Hobsbawm (1992, 5), 'why ethnicity ... should be politicized in modern multi-ethnic societies'. This is because, among other things, as Dickson Eyo (1999) argues, ethnic identity can serve as a potential counter-hegemonic force to

¹ In terms of its 'manipulation' by the elite (see Nkwi 2006; Kagwanja 2009), its harmful effect on economic growth (see, for instance, Easterly and Ross Levine 1997), its direct 'ethnographically proven' correlation with conflict (Eller 1999), etc.

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the centralizing and domineering forces of the nation-state – as well as of hegemonic ethnic groups.

Anthony D. Smith (1991, 21) has famously described the characteristics of ethnic groups as including ‘a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with a specific “homeland”, and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population’. Even though Smith does not consider any one of the characteristics of an ethnic group as the most essential, he argues that common culture is often ‘embodied in myths, memories, symbols and values’. Although he overlooks language among the characteristics, others, such as Adrian Hastings, have argued that ‘an ethnicity is of its nature a single language community’.²

The literature on ethnicity and ethnic groups as a negative phenomenon and/or ‘false consciousness’ in Africa is, in large part, based on the fact that ethnic groups are inventions or constructions. But, as Africa’s leading political economist, the late Claude Ake (1993, 1), argues, this does not eliminate the fact that ‘they are also decidedly real, even in the sense that states are said to be’. Ethnic groups, Ake pursues, are no less real despite all the reasons adduced for their ‘unreality’ by scholars, because ‘they are actual people who are united in consciousness of their common ethnic identity however spurious or misguided that consciousness may be’. Thus, ‘ethnicity is not a fossilized determination but a living presence produced and driven by material and historical forces’ (ibid.).

Even though Ake posits that what needs to be explained is ‘political ethnicity, that is the politicization and transformation of ethnic exclusivity into major political cleavages’ (ibid., 2) and not ‘(h)ow ethnicity comes to be in the first place’, I will argue that the specific forms of evolution of ethnic consciousness in particular contexts constitute a critical background for understanding its politicization or transformation into political ethnicity. This book illustrates, following Ake, that ethnicity is not inherently a problem in Africa, despite the ubiquitous ethnic conflicts that result from ‘ethnic misrepresentations of survival strategies, in emancipatory projects and strategies of power’. What often happens in both lay and academic literature, and in practice, is that ‘abuse of ethnicity’ is confused with ‘its inherent abusiveness’ (ibid., 13). However, we cannot understand the evolution of ethnic consciousness, its politicization and its inherent abusiveness – the latter two are part of the ‘ideology of inter-elite

² Smith (1986, 27) opposes this position.

competition' (Osaghae 1991) – without understanding the role of the elite in the processes.

Indeed, as many ethnic groups and nations forced into the (post)colonial states in Africa continue, in different forms, to struggle for self-determination, autonomy and democratic rights, including justice and equity, the elites of each of the groups are centrally implicated in the determination of the tone and tenor and the direction of these struggles. These elites play critical roles in the ways in which the visions of a glorious past are constructed and deployed (Vail 1991, x), as well as the manner in which these visions are reconciled with contemporary (modern) challenges faced by the ethnic group and the collective dreams of an even more glorious future within Africa's multi-ethnic states. Therefore, this book illustrates why elite theory is central to 'the historical processes involved in the creation of specific examples of ethnic ideology' (Vail 1991, xi).

Nigeria is a very important example of the dilemmas faced by multi-ethnic postcolonial states in Africa. More than half a century after political independence, as the country 'celebrates' a century of its history as a single territory – which started with the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates by the British in 1914 – Nigeria's future remain uncertain. As the most populous country in Africa and one of the most heterogeneous, Nigeria has faced extraordinary problems of national integration in the light of its modern history, as Nigerians continue to search for a more effective, efficient and viable form of national association. The country has experienced a civil war lasting thirty months (1967–79), during which a section of the country, the Eastern Region, under the name Biafra Republic, attempted to break away from the rest. Despite the failure of this attempt at secession, Nigeria has never been at ease. The country's three major ethnic groups and hundreds of other minority groups continue to struggle for national accommodation, with some occasionally expressing their readiness to exit the federal union.

This book is about the cultural and political role of the elite in the making and remaking of one of the largest ethnic nationalities in Africa and in Nigeria – the Yorùbá. It is also about the importance, both symbolic and real, of a dead political leader, the Yorùbá and Nigerian nationalist Chief Ọbáfẹmi Awólówọ, known popularly as Awo. Concretely, it focuses on the struggles within an elite political group known as *Afẹnifẹre* (i.e., 'Lovers of what is good') to define, appropriate and promote Awo's heritage within Yorùbáland and, against that backdrop, to promote Awo's ideal and ideas as the best organizing ethos for the whole of Nigeria. As a study of the political tradition which stems from, and also

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looks back to, one of the key historic figures in shaping modern Nigeria, the book contributes to the debates around the question ‘whither Nigeria?’ Nigeria’s size, diversity, economic weight, role as the dominant regional power of West Africa and the fact that she straddles the Christian/Muslim fault-line across the continent would mean that Nigeria’s predicament and the struggles within and among its elite groups have Africa-wide significance.

Using ethnographic research and historical sociology, I narrate how a dominant agent (Ọbáfẹmi Awólówò) in this process of the (re)making of the Yorùbá in modern Nigeria, built a cult of power around himself, one which has survived his demise. Members of this cult of power, called Afẹnifẹre, claim to have facilitated and to still facilitate the dominant agent’s historic mission. Against this backdrop, the narratives in this book are configured centrally around two intimately interwoven themes: one, the past and continuing (posthumous) agency of this dominant, and, subsequently, *corporate*, agent, Ọbáfẹmi Awólówò – the modern embodiment of the Yorùbá progenitor; and, two, the structural processes and properties by which the members of the Afẹnifẹre interact and struggle for power in their continued personal and collective representation of the ‘modern progenitor’ and his vision of the Yorùbá nation in relation to the Nigerian state.

Through the narration and analysis of material, non-material and interactional phenomena, such as political party and ethnic group organization, cultural politics, democratization struggle, personal ambitions, group solidarity and discord, collective ventures, symbolic performances, memory and commemoration, here, simultaneously, I separate and conflate structure, agency and culture. This is done within the context of the substantive (that is, practical) rationality of this dominant elite group which (re)composes the Yorùbá lifeworld. This book, therefore, considers the subjects not only in the Husserlian sense of a lifeworld based on a ‘coherent universe of existing [subjects]’, including ‘we, each “I-the-man” and all of us together’ (Husserl 1938 [1970], 108), but also in the sense of one ‘I-the-man’ as a representation of ‘we’, the collective. Consequently, participation and contestations in this lifeworld, which, as Jürgen Habermas emphasizes, involves a group’s unquestioned and shared frame, are based on sharing in a commonsensical understanding or, more precisely, assumptions, of ‘who we are’, what we value and what we believe (cf. Frank n.d.). This lifeworld in totality, ‘formed from more or less diffuse, always unproblematic, background convictions . . . [that] serves as a source of situation definitions that are presupposed by

participants as unproblematic' (Habermas 1984, 70; see also Habermas, 1987, 113–97), represents the horizon within which ambitious individuals and groups 'seek to realize their projected ends' (Baxter 1987, 46).

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF ELITES

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past

Karl Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

Prior to the transformation of the *ancien régime* in Europe in the 18th century, 'élite' was a term that was interpreted in a theological sense to mean the 'elect', that is, God's 'chosen' or simply 'those most preferred and eminent persons' (Williams 1976, 112–13; Bottomore 1966, 7). After this period, the term was used more to point generally to social distinction by rank and became synonymous with 'best', 'quality' and 'choice'. The decline and disappearance of feudal distinctions in the 19th century witnessed the emergence of new ways of appointing leaders. Consequently, new ideas of the term 'elite' were raised, even though these were still not altogether unrelated to class and power (Shore 2002, 10). The use of the word became widely diffused in early 20th-century Britain and America through the sociological theories of elites, particularly by Gaetano Mosca (1939) – the originator of the concept of 'ruling class' – and Vilfredo Pareto (1935). Despite the shifts in the social meanings and uses of the word 'elite' through the last few centuries, the concept has not lost its connotations of exclusivity and superiority.

Marxian perspectives, derived from the classic formulation of Marx, in contrast to elite theorists such as Mosca and Pareto, and even Max Weber (1968), help to illuminate our understanding of the social process from the perspective of elite theory. In contrast to Hegel, Marx conceived of society as one in which the motive force emanating from the economic sphere generates contradictions that lead to class polarization (David 2004, 280). In *The German Ideology* (1932, 64), Marx describes the ruling class that is produced from such polarization as 'the ruling material force of society', 'the class which has the means of production at its disposal', the class that controls the state which, in fact, enables it to rule, and the class that determines the ruling ideas of the time. According to Marx, these are nothing 'more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas' (Keller 1991, 49). In his materialist conception of

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history, Marx concluded that the antagonism between classes will lead to a revolution which will produce a classless society.

Pareto and Mosca are vehemently anti-Marxist. Both conclude from their review of history that political elites are an inevitable social phenomenon, thus dismissing a classless society as the inevitable end result of the progress of history. For Mosca (1896), the superior power of the organized minority over the unorganized majority is key to understanding the differences between the elite and non-elite. For Pareto, elite rule is not only universal, it is an ‘unalterable fact of social life’ (David 2004, 280). Neither ‘the humanitarian who swoons over a passage of Rousseau’, ‘the socialist who swears by the words of Marx and Engels’ nor the ‘devout democrat who bows reverent head and submits to the judgment and will to the oracles of suffrage, universal or limited, or what is worse, to the pronouncements of parliaments and legislatures’ hold any appeal for Pareto. He concludes that ‘it is always an oligarchy that governs, finding ways to give to the “will of the people”, the expressions which the few desire’ (Pareto 1963, 585). Mosca and Pareto ‘were fundamentally concerned with the reasons for minority rule’, assuming that the existing elite is composed of the ‘best’ people – best strictly in terms of the values of the society at a given time (Keller 1991, 11–13).

Against the backdrop of the ‘classical’ conceptions of the place of the elite in history and society, the first question that arises is: What constitutes an ‘elite’, or who are the elite? There have been as many definitions in the literature (Dahl 1958; Lasswell 1961; Mills 1965) as there have been different labels put on the empirical reality of the existence of elites, that is, those who wield power and control resources: ‘ruling class’, ‘political class’, ‘power elite’, ‘ruling elite’, ‘governing class’, ‘governing elite’, ‘leadership group’, ‘ruling cabal’, ‘oligarchy’. William Quandt (1970) argued four decades ago that the ‘quagmire of elite studies’ resulted from the use of empirically imprecise variables (Zuckerman 1977, 330). A basic element of any attempt to answer this question is the fact that those so described are at the topmost level of any society, whether in the social, political or economic arenas.

However, while most scholars are concerned with describing elites in general, some have concentrated their energies on describing *political* elites in particular. This is based on the assumption – largely true – that the political elite are usually at the apex of the elite spectrum. In this context, John Higley and Michael Burton (2001, 8) define political elites as ‘persons who are able, by virtue of their authoritative positions in powerful organizations and movements of whatever kind, to affect national political outcomes regularly and substantially’. However, this definition, perhaps

because, one, it concentrates on the ‘political’, and, two, it was constructed out of liberal democratic theory (see Higley and Burton 2006), ignores the fact that the definition of elite status is so context bound and spatially specific that the ability to ‘affect political outcomes regularly and substantially’ need not be ‘national’ to make powerful persons qualify to be described as elites. For example, there are local elites whose powers are limited to their specific spatial locations. Therefore, emphasizing ‘the social’, rather than the ‘national political’, might be a far more useful way to capture the elite.

As a working definition therefore, the elite can be described as ‘those who occupy the most influential positions or roles in the important spheres of social life’ (Shore 2002, 4). In this book, I adopt Shore’s elaboration of this definition:

They are typically incumbents: the leaders, rulers, and decision makers in any sector of society, or custodians of the machinery of policy making. [They] are thus ‘makers and shakers’: *groups* whose ‘cultural capital’ positions them above their fellow citizens and whose decisions crucially shape what happens in the wider society. Equally important, *they are the groups* that dominate what [Norbert Elias] . . . called the ‘means of orientation’: people whose ideas and interests are hegemonic. (Ibid.; emphasis added)

Shore flags up the fact that both agency/actorhood and structure/organization are involved in the definition of ‘elite’. Whether formally or informally, networking is also a basic factor in relation to the status and acts that confirm *eliteness*. In recognition of this, Abner Cohen adds that, ‘To promote their interests, [the elite] seek to cooperate and coordinate their actions by means of a *corporate organization*’ (Cohen 1981, xvi; emphasis added). ‘Agency’, ‘exclusivity’ or ‘exclusiveness’, ‘power’, ‘influence’, ‘dominance’ are some of the qualities that this category suggests. Thus, Marcus (1983, 10) suggests that elites ‘represent a way of conceiving power in society and attributing responsibility to persons [agents] rather than to impersonal processes [institutions, rules and resources]’.

Even though the study of the elite in the disciplines of sociology, history and political science is old and rich (Parsons 1951), anthropological focus on the elite has been the exception rather than the rule (Shore 2002, 10; cf. Marcus 1979, 135–6). However, within the last three decades, works by Abner Cohen (1981) and George E. Marcus (1983), followed by those of João de Pina-Cabral and Antónia Pedrosa de Lima (2000), Chris Shore and Stephen Nugent (2002), and Richard Werbner (2004) have provided important theoretical and ethnographic insights into why it is important