

Adunni Oluwole: Nationalist, Yet Procolonial

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Prominent women like Funmilayo Ransome Kuti and Margaret Ekpo are often treated less than the men in Nigeria's political history. Also, in this unfortunate ahistorical trough is Olaniwun Adunni Oluwole, itinerant preacher, activist, nationalist and procolonial figure, an eloquent speaker who lived from 1905 to 1957. While writers of Nigeria's colonial histories seem to sweep women to a side, political figures such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmadu Bello and others are canonised as heroes of Nigeria's independence. When we remove this unsettling patriarchal coloration, we find symbolic personas such as Adunni Oluwole even more prominent.

Adunni was born in Ibadan but grew up in Mushin, Lagos. She was taken under the guardianship of Bishop Adolphus Howells, Vicar of St. John's church, Aroloya and she was in the church choir. As one of the most active young people in the church, she wrote a play for the Girls' Guild and it was directed by the famous nationalist, Herbert Macaulay. Later, she established the first female-owned professional theater group in Western Nigeria. Her interactions with the Nigerian elite while growing up with Bishop Howells must have given her a good understanding of the country's educated elite and she sought to demystify them. In 1945, Nigerian workers demanded an increase in minimum wage from the colonial government and it was denied. This resulted in a general strike that paralyzed activities in many parts of the country. Funds were raised for the strike effort and Adunni Oluwole was one of the donors. She also marched with the workers and helped in mobilizing the women to join the strike.

After the general strike, her career as an activist was launched. She joined different nationalist causes. For example, in 1954, dissatisfied with the way most political parties operated along ethnic lines, she formed the Nigerian Commoners' Liberal Party. History Scholar, Sara Panata notes that 'the party has objectives that are not specifically focused on women: the Nigerian Commoners' Liberal Party, founded in 1954 on the initiative of Mrs Olaniwun Adunni Oluwole.' Even though no one gave Adunni and her party a chance, in 1954, they won a legislative seat in the Oshun division. The candidate, D. L. Olateju defeated candidates from powerful parties like Obafemi Awolowo's Action Group and Nnamdi Azikiwe led National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon.

Chief S. A Tinubu, the Action Group candidate who lost the election, ignoring the effective campaign led by Adunni Oluwole and tagging her ignorant, attributed his loss to the ignorance of the electorate. In his book, he states that 'Being ignorant like her, the people swallowed her principles of economics and government. This classist sentiment was very typical of the elite of the period and it must have been the popular narrative among the elite who saw Adunni as a threat to their continued dominance of politics. This tag would unfortunately stick to her name, thereby making people misapprehend her politics. There was a recorded incident in August 1955 when she went to visit the Olubadan, traditional head of Ibadan to air her political views and court support for her party. The king, Isaac Babalola Akinyele who is Ibadan's first educated king invited some of his chiefs and noblemen to listen to her speak. Adunni was dressed in prisoners' uniform as is her practice, in an attempt to dramatize how the elite would imprison the masses if they are allowed to take over as the political parties were advocating. As she demonstrated her ideas, the Chairman of Ibadan District Council, the flamboyant and egotistic Honourable Adegoke Adelabu of the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon, himself a populist like Adunni, shut her down. He called her a harlot and threatened to beat her, eventually conniving with the traditional authorities to banish her from the city because she was said to be misleading the masses. She eventually moved to Akure where she was until she died of whitlow in 1957.

This erroneous perception of Adunni Oluwole as a rabble rouser made her unpopular among the elite but increased her popularity among the rural people who felt oppressed by the economic policies like taxes dictated by the Nigerian elite in power. Many of the elite then were openly misogynistic and oppressive. In her preaching and rallies, she showed passion and symbolized her opinion by acting out her prediction. She would hire strong men to pull her with ropes she had tied round her waist to let people know that self-rule will make them slaves to the elite. Also, the internal acrimonies within parties and cases of corruption which many political leaders were guilty of made her very suspicious of them.

In popular culture and history, the only enduring comment about her legacy is her procolonial stance and her party was reduced to that. People generally called her party 'Ègbé K'Óyìnbó má ì lọ' which means 'The Party That does not want the colonialists to leave yet.' This unfortunate summation of her legacy makes her look like a colonial minion who had an inferiority complex and would prefer that

Nigeria remain under British rule perpetually. Perhaps if she was a male member of a major political party or had connections with the educated elite who controlled the newspapers, her ideas might have been debated and examined. She was not advocating that white people not leave, rather she stated that it was not yet time as there were still tensions between the people and the debates on minority rights was also raging. A lot of minority groups feared domination by the major groups, hence the commission of inquiry led by Henry Willinks in 1957.

An incisive look at her trajectory suggests that what she advocated was gradualism instead of immediate independence. Unfortunately, she did not have the wherewithal to push the idea further and her gender already predisposes her to being dismissed in a society that is highly misogynistic. Her participation in the General Workers strike of 1945 which was against the colonial authorities makes it obvious that she was not a colonial minion. It is also noteworthy that when Queen Elizabeth of England visited Nigeria in 1957, Adunni Oluwole as part of the delegation that welcomed her rode on a horse, showcasing the Queen her high self-esteem.

Her thoughts on the corruption by Nigeria's elite were sincere and not completely untrue. Chief S. A. Tinubu, who lost the legislative seat to her party, testified that she harped on the corruption of Nigeria's elite. He notes that 'She harped on the corruption of Nigerians, and would not trust the political leaders.' Across the country, there were allegations of corruption by the Nigerian elite and there were commissions of inquiry formed to investigate these allegations. One of such investigations recommended that Honourable Adegoke Adelabu resign from his position as the Chairman of Ibadan District Council and be barred from serving in ministerial capacities in the future because of corruption. Nobel Prize winner, Wole Soyinka also testified to the crookedness that characterized the behavior of the leaders when he said in his memoir that 'I was not pessimistic about the future but extremely cautious, having come into contact with the first-generation leaders in my student days in England. The enemy, as I had identified it, was power and its pitfalls...'

The shaky foundation on which the 1960 attainment of self-rule was built became most obvious in the aftermath of the 1959 elections. Parties were formed along ethnic lines. Corruption throttled in the heart of the infant nation. The military juntas wrecked the country even more. Defense Scholar and historian, JNC Hill notes that:

Each party relied heavily on the support it received from the voters of one particular region for its electoral success and broader political influence. None had truly national appeal. None could claim to represent the interests of all Nigerians. And none could dare to do so for fear of alienating the voters of the region on whom they so depended.

It was obvious to the leaders that Nigeria was not ready for a system of government that attempted to put the entire country under a single indigenous power. From independence until the first coup that ended the first republic in 1966, the country was unable to conduct a proper election that was widely acceptable. Also, the attempt at holding a census in 1962 ended in crises with many lives being lost and properties being destroyed because of massive distrust and allegations of rigging.

It is arguable that if Adunni Oluwole's ideas had been accepted for debate by the educated elite, perhaps they would have been helpful in the process of national emancipation. It is remarkable that unlike many other former colonies, New Zealand does not have an exact Independence Day. The country left the hold of colonialism gradually until it attained full self-rule. Although New Zealand is a small and less complicated country than Nigeria, it shows that it is doable. Also, she was genuine in her commitment to Nigeria. She believed in her country and desired a better life for her countrymen. Even if her ideas were wrong, her dedication to justice is undeniable.

Her prediction that the elite were going to replace the colonial system with a worse system was proven true by the events that succeeded independence. In spite of her support for the continuation of the colonial system, she was not a supporter of oppression. A cursory observation of her ideas makes it obvious that she was an advocate of gradualism as a political philosophy. One may then need to ask again why Nigeria continues to constrict space for women in politics. Is politics a male affair alone? Notwithstanding the obscurity that has marked her legacy; she remains one of Nigeria's foremost nationalist, ranking on the same level with many who are now referred to as the founding fathers. The complexity in her politics makes her ideas look problematic if not examined but if a second look is taken at her ideas, there is a lot of credibility in them. She held two seemingly opposing ideas at the same time, she was procolonial yet she was an unwavering nationalist who did her best to ensure that ordinary Nigerians live better lives.

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