Wale Adebanwi

Yorùbá Elites and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria

Ọbáfẹ́mi Awólọ́wọ̀ and Corporate Agency

CAMBRIDGE

Yorùbá Elites and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria

Yorùbá Elites and Ethnic Politics in Nigeria investigates the dynamics and challenges of ethnicity and elite politics in Nigeria, Africa's largest democracy. Wale Adebanwi demonstrates how the corporate agency of the elite transformed the modern history and politics of one of Africa's largest ethnic groups, the Yorùbá. The argument is organized around the ideas and cultural representations of Ọbáfẹ́mi Awólọ́wọ̀, the central signifier of modern Yorùbá culture. Through the narration and analysis of material, non-material and interactional phenomena – such as political party and ethnic group organization, cultural politics, democratic struggle, personal ambitions, group solidarity, death, memory and commemoration – this book examines the foundations of the legitimacy of the Yorùbá political elite. Using historical sociology and ethnographic research, Adebanwi takes readers into the hitherto unexplored undercurrents of one of the most powerful and progressive elite groups in Africa, tracing its internal and external struggles for power.

Wale Adebanwi is Associate Professor in the Program in African American and African Studies at the University of California, Davis.

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For my wife, Tèmítọ́pẹ́,
and my daughter, Liberty, who was named as a reminder of what humanizes us all.
And in fond memory:
of my loving mother, Mary, who departed as I was finishing the revision of this manuscript; and Sue Benson, whose initial supervision at Cambridge and generosity of spirit I will always treasure.

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A Note on Orthography

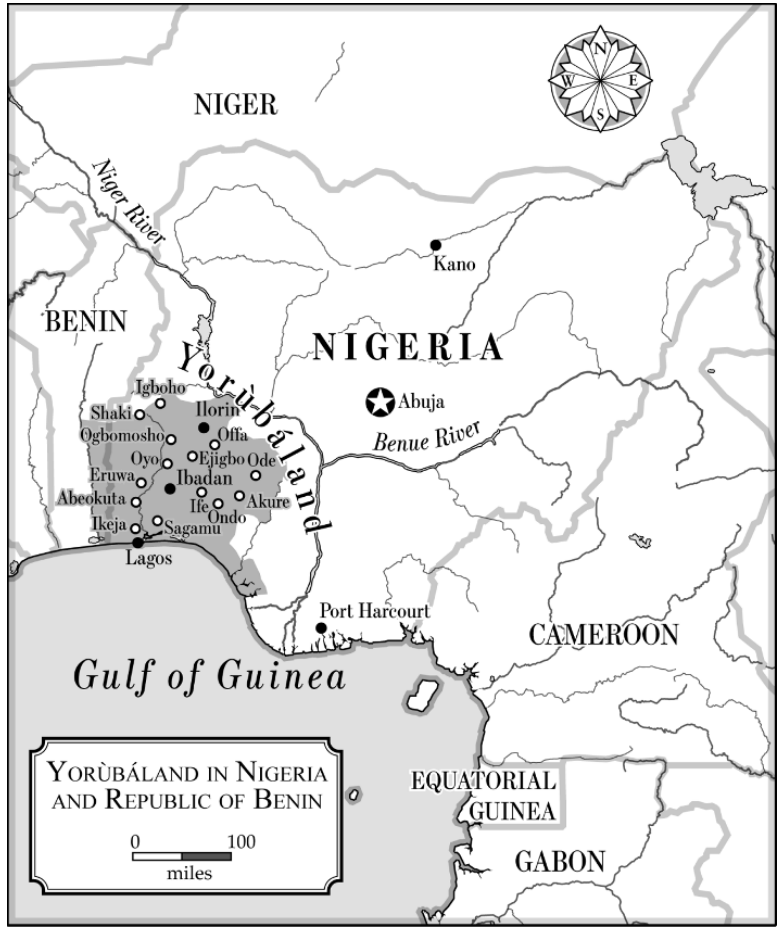
Yorùbá is a tonal language. Therefore, diacritics (tone marks and subdots) are important for understanding the language. However, in this work, I use tone marks and subdots for only four key words – Afẹ́nifẹ́re, Ọbáfẹ́mi Awólọ́wọ̀, Odùduwà and Yorùbá – except where they are quoted from other sources.

List of Abbreviations

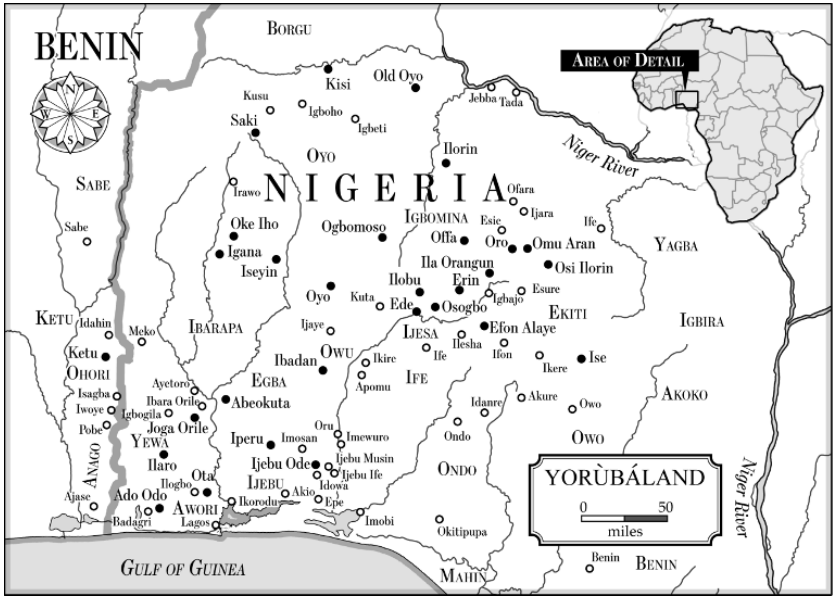
AC	Action Congress
ACN	Action Congress of Nigeria
AD	Alliance for Democracy
AG	Action Group
ALGON	Association of Local Governments of Nigeria
AMORC	Ancient and Mystical Order Rosæ Crucis
ANPP	All Nigeria People's Party
APP	All People's Party
ARG	Afẹ́nifẹ́re Renewal Group
AWOFEB	Awólọ́wọ̀ Free Education Beneficiaries
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CPC	Congress for Progressive Change
CWC	Central Working Committee
DAWN	Development Agenda for Western Nigeria
DPA	Democratic People's Alliance
EFCC	Economic and Financial Crimes Commission
HG	Heritage Group
IITA	International Institute of Tropical Agriculture
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INEC	Independent National Electoral Commission
ING	Interim National Government
IPP	Ibadan People's Party
MI	Moremi Initiative
NADECO	National Democratic Coalition
NCC	National Convention Committee

NCNC	National Congress of Nigerian Citizens (formerly National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons)
NCNC	Ndigbo Council for National Coordination
NCP	National Conscience Party
NEC	National Electoral Commission
NNDP	Nigerian National Democratic Party
NPC	Northern People's Congress
NPN	National Party of Nigeria
NPP	Nigerian People's Party
NRC	National Republican Convention
NSO	Nigerian Security Organization
NSU	Native Settlers Union
NYM	Nigerian Youth Movement
OAIGPP	Ọbáfémi Awólọ́wọ̀ Institute of Government and Public Policy
OLM	Oodua Liberation Movement
OPC	Oodua People's Congress
OPF	Okun People's Front
ORA	Oodua Redemption Alliance
OYM	Oodua Youth Movement
PCF	People's Consultative Forum
PDM	People's Democratic Movement
PDP	People's Democratic Party
PFN	People's Front of Nigeria
PSP	People's Solidarity Party
ROF	Reformed *Ogboni* Fraternity
SAN	Senior Advocate of Nigeria
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme
SDP	Social Democratic Party
UPGA	United Progressive Grand Alliance
UPN	Unity Party of Nigeria
YCE	Yorùbá Council of Elders
YUF	Yorùbá Unity Forum

1. Map of Yorùbáland in West Africa



11. Map of Yorùbáland in Nigeria



III. Map of Yorùbáland

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 Ọbáfẹ́mi Awólọ́wọ̀, the Yorùbá leaders were also asking Nigeria to return to Awólọ́wọ̀'s ideas on the political organization of Nigeria. The leader of the failed secessionist Republic of Biafra, Chief Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu, had described Awólọ́wọ̀ 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), Awólọ́wọ̀, 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' (Awólọ́wọ̀ 1947, 47–8).

FIGURE 1. 'Founding Father': Awólọ́wọ̀'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 Awólọ́wọ̀, 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, Awólọ́wọ̀ 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). Awólọ́wọ̀'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 Ọbáfẹ́mi Awólọ́wọ̀ Annual Memorial Lecture organized by the Ọbáfẹ́mi Awólọ́wọ̀ Foundation, northern radical politician and former governor of Kaduna State, Alhaji Balarabe Musa, described Awólọ́wọ̀ as a legend 'whose principles can be a guiding light to

present day leaders'. He added that Awólọ́wọ̀ '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 Awólọ́wọ̀ 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 Awólọ́wọ̀ was the premier of the region in the late 1950s. This was the place, stated Akinrinade, where Awólọ́wọ̀ 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 Awólọ́wọ̀'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 Awólọ́wọ̀'s leadership. Years after Awólọ́wọ̀'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.

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 Ọbáfẹ́mi Awólọ́wọ̀, known popularly as Awo. Concretely, it focuses on the struggles within an elite political group known as *Afẹ́nifẹ́re* (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

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 (Ọbáfẹ́mi Awólọ́wọ̀) 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 Afẹ́nifẹ́re, 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, Ọbáfẹ́mi Awólọ́wọ̀ – the modern embodiment of the Yorùbá progenitor; and, two, the structural processes and properties by which the members of the Afẹ́nifẹ́re 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