

THE GENESIS OF FREE EDUCATION IN WESTERN NIGERIA, 1951-1966

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Introduction

The 1950s witnessed an exemplary innovation in the history of Education in Nigeria. This was an era of Free Primary Education, pioneered by the then Western regional government. The scheme was preceded by the Western form of literacy education, championed by the Christian Missions and the British colonial government.¹ By the mid-twentieth century, therefore, western education had, to some extent, been firmly rooted in Western Nigeria. However, because of the limited objectives of the pioneers of western education in Western Nigeria, educational development in the region, as the case was in the entire country, in the period before 1950 was grossly inadequate for meeting the needs of a modern state.² In simple terms, neither the Christian Missions nor the colonial government in Western Nigeria (and indeed in Nigeria as a whole) in their entire ramification had adequate answer to popular demands for mass education. This was the social milieu in which was developed the Free Education scheme in Western Nigeria in the 1950s, specifically from 1955 to 1966. It is against this background that one could really appreciate the revolutionary nature of the programme in this area of study.

The Era of Transition

For Nigeria, the decade of the 1950s was marked by the crucial transition from colonial to independent status.³ In 1951, the country adopted a Federal Constitution, named after its author, Sir John Macpherson. Through its provisions, the regional Houses of Assembly ceased to be potent advisory bodies for which they had been noted since their formation in 1946. Henceforth, the new constitution provided for democratic elections to the regional Houses of Assembly. But, more importantly, the legislature of each region was empowered to make laws for peace, order and good government

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of the region, with respect to certain enumerated subjects, of which education was one.⁴ With this new development, therefore, responsibility for education devolved on the governments of the regions. Consequently, ministries of education were created in each of the Northern, Eastern and Western regional governments of Nigeria, and were responsible for education in their respective regions while the Federal Ministry of Education was in charge of education in the Federal Territory of Lagos.

The Action Group party, led by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, won the first election to the Western House of Assembly in 1952. In his first budget speech, Chief Awolowo, made it clear to the members of the House that his government would give top priority to education, among other things, as far as that budget would allow.⁵ This he spelled out as a basic principle by which his party was guided:

As far as possible, expenditure on services which tend to the welfare and health and education of the people should be increased at the expense of any expenditure that does not answer to the same test.⁶

In July of the same year, the Minister of Education for the Western Region, Chief S. O. Awokoya, presented a comprehensive set of proposals calling for a free, Universal Primary Education (U.P.E) for the Western Region by January 1955.⁷ In the view of Chief Awokoya, these proposals deserved utmost priority. For, according to him:

Educational development is imperative and urgent. It must be treated as a national emergency, second only to war. It must move with the momentum of a revolution. Our past history makes it a matter of paramount necessity to catch up with the rest of the world. Our present position makes it obligatory to re-orientate our policy and formulate certain major principles which must determine the nature of our institutional proposals.⁸

This was the prelude to the birth of what Professor Babs Fafunwa has aptly described as “the boldest and perhaps the most unprecedented educational scheme in Africa South of the Sahara”⁹ as

an ample demonstration of the Western Regional government's whole-hearted commitment to the vital interest of her subjects.

Some Motivating Factors: External Influence

In embarking on a scheme of this nature, the Western regional government was motivated by many factors – external and internal.

Generally, by the late 1940s and early 1950s, there seemed to be a world-wide acceptance of every individual's right to education. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10th December 1948 made a number of assertions about the inalienable rights of every human being. The Declaration guarantees for the individual, a whole range of basic freedom – among which included “the freedom of parents to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children”.¹⁰ Far more important, at least as far as this paper is concerned, is Article 26, Sub-Section 11 of the Declaration which made the following assertion as to the rights to which each individual is entitled.

Everyone has the right to education. *Education shall be free at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory.* Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit (emphasis mine).¹¹

The United Nations is a world body, membership of which is composed of all sovereign states – the world over. From its declaration above, it would be glaringly seen that there is no ambiguity whatsoever as to the inalienable rights of man to free and fair educational opportunity. One cannot accurately gauge the extent to which the U.N. Declaration motivated the government of the defunct Western Region. Yet one cannot rule out the probability of this Declaration having an influential effect on the policy makers of Western Nigeria towards the introduction of the free education scheme. This argument would hold when one takes into cognisance the time element between December 1948 when the Declaration was

passed and July 1952 when proposals for the free education programme was laid before the regional House of Assembly.

In any case, if the U.N. influence on the Western Region leaders was not obvious, that of a sister West African country – the Gold Coast (now Ghana), was perhaps very glaring. For, there are manifest indications that the leaders drew some inspiration from the Gold Coast example. In the Gold Coast, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah had laid before the parliament in 1951, an accelerated Development Plan for Education, soon after the adoption of a new constitution in that year. It was the objective of the new plan “to help develop a balanced system working towards universal primary education as rapidly as consideration of finances and teacher training allowed but maintaining at the same time proportionate facilities for further education for those who fitted to receive it”.¹² It was this example of Gold Coast (it seemed) which acted as a morale booster or catalyst in motivating the Western Region Government. This could be deduced from the Education minister’s (Chief S. O. Awokoya’s) statement in his proposal:

Elsewhere on the West Coast of Africa, the young and vigorous Government of the Gold Coast has blazed the trail of progressive educational development..... If we do not follow the Gold Coast example, we shall have suffered in vain the pains and anguish of these troublous times; but if we do, we shall emerge from the throes of this transitional period into a glorious age in which this country will enjoy the fruits of political independence and the blessings of economic freedom.¹³

External influences of the Gold Coast and the United Nations were complemented by convictions of the new political leaders. Study and travel abroad seemed to have made such leaders as Obafemi Awolowo and S. O. Awokoya to be painfully aware of the great economic, cultural and psychological gap between the modern world and Africa. They tended to judge Nigeria’s progress not in relation to its own past but in relation to changes in more advanced countries

which were steadily increasing their economic and technological lead over the less developed areas of the world.¹⁴ Caught in a revolution of rising expectations, therefore, the leaders were no longer content with the progress of recent decades. Awokoya for instance complained bitterly: "We are not living here in Nigeria, we are only existing".¹⁵

Motivating Factors: Internal Dynamics

Whatever the degree of influence of either the United Nations, the Gold Coast example or the exposure of the leaders to the external world, one should exercise some measure of restraint in order not to over-stress the external influences, at the expense of the internal dynamics of change within the society. For all practical purposes, it is very obvious that programmes of this nature would depend very much on a combination of factors: the relative availability of resources (human and material – especially finance), effective utilisation of same; leadership and foresight, as well as a general goal – oriented governmental policy, among other things.

One factor, perhaps, which spurred or acted as a booster for Western Nigeria to pursue a vigorous policy of universal/free education seemed to lie in the relative availability of funds. The regional government, apart from political advantages, seemed also to have economic advantages. Prior to 1954, the West was the wealthiest region in Nigeria¹⁶ resulting in her subsidizing development of the East and North because the British fiscal commissioners maintained that central government revenue should be allocated to the regions on the basis of need (in effect population) rather than derivation (i.e. each region's proportion of the country's exports and imports).¹⁷ At the London Constitutional Conference of 1953, however, the Action Group leaders pressed vigorously for a re-allocation of Federal revenues on the basis of derivation. Consequently, a new revenue allocation formula that took these demands into account shifted significantly the economic position of Nigeria's political units. On balance the Federal Government lost £9 million, the East lost £200,000, the North gained £1.2 million and the West gained £3.8 million.¹⁸ In view of the enormous sums now accruing to the Western

regional government, she could subsequently afford a programme of the magnitude of a free education.

The West won another significant financial victory when the commodity marketing boards were regionalised in early 1954. These boards, established following the Second World War, ostensibly to stabilise the prices of Nigeria's major exports, in fact accumulated vast sterling reserves estimated at £92 million by the end of 1953.¹⁹ When Nigerians came to power, it dawned on them to use these funds for development purposes. As part of the trend towards Federation, it was decided that the assets of the marketing boards would be distributed to each federating unit according to its share of the commodities exported; the West thereupon received £34.4 million, the North £24.8 million and the East £15.1 million.²⁰ Thus in the words of Professor Abernethy, the Western regional government was "in a unique financial position to implement a crash program like universal primary education".²¹

Though the economic climate of the 1950s was fairly favourable to the pursuance of an ambitious policy of the magnitude of free education, it should be borne in mind that it is one thing to be naturally endowed with economic resources, it is another thing to utilize and manage those resources judiciously. In the case of Western Nigeria, the region had also the political advantage of having leaders of foresight who were prepared to tap the resources and utilize them for a free education programme. The men were guided by certain principles and aimed at certain goals in their proposal for a free education. These principles, aims and rationale were clearly spelt out at various times by Chief Obafemi Awolowo and by the Education Minister for the Western Region – Chief S. O. Awokoya. A major motivation for the Scheme, as has been suggested elsewhere was the gross inadequacy of both the missionary and colonial education to meet the yearnings not only of the Western region but the country as a whole.²² This made it a matter of utmost urgency for the leaders to want to pursue a vigorous policy of mass literacy exercise. According to Awokoya in his proposal, "our educational services require a great deal of expansion because they are not adequate for the needs of the

region”.²³ Irrespective of the society, education is not meant to be static. “Education”, says Nwagwu, “has the growing quality of a living organism”.²⁴ Thus it must be constantly changing and adapting itself to new demands and new circumstances as well as challenges. In the circumstances of the period of the 1950s, therefore, there was an urgent need for a massive expansion in education. This greatly touched the minds of the leaders of the Western Region. As Awokoya stressed,

The position today has not materially changed. Up till now, most of the school leavers still look forward to an appointment in the Civil Service or in the mercantile houses. The young man literate in English is still in high demand. His literacy still has to couple with ability to calculate. Although the curriculum of schools has been broadened and the young man with a School Certificate has had a more or less liberal education, he is still used as an “interpreter”, and no demand is placed on his liberal education.....²⁵

Closely related to the above was the need for development. The generally low level of literacy and the consequential mass illiteracy plagued the entire country. “Where are we today?” queried Awokoya. “The masses of our people can neither read nor write. Two-thirds of our children are not at school.”²⁶ The salient fact then remains that education was seen by the launchers of the Free Education Scheme as the best weapon in the battle against the societal ills such as malnutrition, disease, ignorance, unemployment, superstitious beliefs and practices, and the like. To checkmate all these, there was a strong feeling of urgency for mass education. This touchy aspect of the societal ills and the urgency to eliminate same was equally reflected in Awokoya’s proposal to the House. For, according to him:

By a proper presentation of new knowledge, superstitious beliefs can be eliminated. Children must learn, even in the primary schools, the truth about the things above us, around us and below us. Only then can the firmament cease to be a bowl studded with stars, and the shooting stars dead princes. The rain

doctor will cease to indicate the approach of the day of judgement. Rivers and streams, trees and forests will no longer be deified and the unexplored interior or the earth will no longer be the abode of the departed spirits.²⁷

On the grounds that Universal/Free Education is a very vital weapon for driving away ignorance and superstition, and in raising national consciousness and improving citizens' receptiveness to new ideas, therefore, the leaders did not treat it with levity. It was considered so basic to nation-building that the region could not leave education to the whims and caprices of the individual's choice. "To leave education to expand just as it pleases, without any proper guidance or direction, without intelligent stimulation", observed Awokoya, "would be clearly irresponsible and positively unsuitable for the needs of Africa today. Education has indeed become the most potent factor in determining our national survival in this Atomic age".²⁸

It would appear from all indications that there were popular pressures from the populace itself, for an educational expansion at this period. Even though it is difficult to gauge public opinion or assess its importance, the period up to the 1950s demonstrated clearly that the average citizen in this part of the country was enthusiastic about education. The very success of the educated elite in attaining political power during the decolonisation period undoubtedly reinforced the popular view that education was the key of power, wealth and prestige.²⁹ Professor Abernethy quotes an article published in one of the July 1950 issues of the *Lagos Daily Service*, and credited to one Mr. A. O. Akintoye as clearly indicative of the pressures to which the education Minister would soon be subject:

What we therefore say is this. We want to appoint an African Minister of Education, give him £294,980, the vote of the Department for the financial year 1950-51, and see whether he cannot open more Government elementary schools in five years. If he cannot, we vote him out and put another man in his place.³⁰

It is not surprising then that on assuming office, the new education minister was bombarded with requests from all quarters for more schools and scholarships. This might probably explain why Awokoya himself tagged his proposal to be “the embodiment of public desires with regard to the educational development of the country”.³¹

Even though the launchers of the Free Education Programme in Western Nigeria never considered their efforts in these terms, the evidences clearly reveal that they were motivated by considerations involving capacity for self government through massive public enlightenment – which in itself is an index of political development. It was perceived that an informed citizenry would make a democratic government more feasible. In his *Autobiography* for instance, Obafemi Awolowo remarked:

To educate the children and enlighten the illiterate adults is to lay a solid foundation not only for future social and economic progress but also for political stability. A truly educated citizenry is, in my view, one of the most powerful deterrents to dictatorship, oligarchy, and feudal aristocracy.³²

S.O. Awokoya had earlier spoken along the same line when, as early as 1952, he stated that,

... a literate public is a great political force that can be readily indoctrinated for good or for ill and... far reaching economic and political developments cannot take place unless the masses of the people are literate and educated.³³

To some extent, the idea of Universal/Free Education in Western Nigeria seemed to have stemmed in part, from the realisation that education is not only an investment in human capital, but also a prerequisite for economic development. In the observation of Professor B. O. Ukeje, free education “is actually indispensable for both progressive leadership and enlightened followership; it is indeed

necessary for effective life in a technological society”³⁴ and should therefore be open to all. The United States of America is undoubtedly one of the best developed nations of the world today. Lawrence Cremin argued in his book that the greatness of America and the distinctive purpose and animating spirit of Americans lay in the country’s commitment to popular education.³⁵ This seemed to have been echoed in the minds of the Western Nigerian political leaders when Awokoya stated inter alia:

...our survival as a race in this atomic age will depend on our ability to initiate and our capacity and competence to implement bold schemes of political, economic and educational advancement. No statement can be more true.³⁶

It was also the intention of the leaders to champion the course of an education policy that would in the end facilitate the rapid economic transformation not only of the region but of the country as an entity. The near absolute dependence of the country on foreign countries for the supply of virtually all necessities of life – partly a direct result of the colonial economic structure greatly agitated the minds of the leaders of Western Nigeria. This moved them in no small measure towards wanting to arrest the ugly situation by embarking on the massive vocational and technical – biased education along with the Universal Free Education, all with the aim of developing not only Western Nigeria but the entire country economically. In the words of Awokoya,

The economic principle that must underline our educational policy must aim at a comprehensive economic development of the country. Today 90 per cent of our population is engaged in agriculture and food production, the rest are responsible for the distribution of imported goods. Practically all the other needs of the country are imported from overseas. Comfortable human shelter cannot be built without the importation of cement, iron sheets, glass, nails, whitewash and nails.... Any properly conceived system of education must set out to

remove this absolute dependence on the economic fortunes of European countries....³⁷

The education planners had at the back of their minds the possibility of giving the youths the opportunities necessary for the acquisition of the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values which would enable them to lead happy productive lives as individuals and discharge their social duties for the betterment of life in the society. The universal education proposed was one which would be geared towards the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human dignity, rights and fundamental freedom. This was well reflected in Awokoya's Proposal to the House. He stressed:

Of immediate practical importance is the training of men who can man the complex machinery of the modern state at all levels. Expert economists who must manage and control monetary and financial policies, who will promote industry and trade.... Again, we need men who can handle every description of international affairs.³⁸

One would adequately appreciate the steps taken by the Western Region government in the area of secondary education as part of her efforts to popularise education when one realises the problems encountered throughout the length and breadth of the country prior to the take off of the Free Education Scheme. As rightly emphasised by Professor Nduka, in respect of the educational dilemma of the region, "there was an incredible bottle-neck with regard to the passage from primary schools to the secondary schools".³⁹ For instance, "in 1950, under 5,000 or between four and five percent of the school leavers could find places in secondary schools in the following year."⁴⁰ This same fear was expressed on the floor of the Western House of Assembly on the 30th July, 1952 when the education minister lamented that "one-seventh of those at school (primary) are suitable for secondary education but they cannot all get".⁴¹ Rather, only about five percent were admitted.⁴² Obviously, this ugly situation presented

a great challenge to a young government that was meaningfully committed to the vital interests of the people it governed.

Conclusion

The principles and rationale stated above would clearly show that the proposal for a free and universal education was indeed a momentous and revolutionary one. This effort represented an awareness of the value of universal education in the building of an orderly modern society. A careful examination shows also that the principles embedded in this proposal were ones which if pursued to their logical conclusions were geared towards long term results rather than that of short term, not only for Western Nigeria, but the country as a whole. They represented the predicament which at the moment in question, the country was facing.

References

1. The activities of the Christian Missionaries and the Colonial governments respectively, in the area of Western Education not only in Western Nigeria but in the country as a whole are extensively covered in existing literature. Relevant studies on the above subject include the following: A Babs Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria* (London: George Unwin & Allen, 1974); C. O. Taiwo, *The Nigeria Education System: Past, Present and Future* (Lagos, Nelson, 1980); Segun Adesina, *Planning and Educational Development in Nigeria*, (Lagos: Education Industries Nigeria Ltd. 1977); Otoni Amadi Nduka, *Western Education and the Nigerian Cultural Background* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1964). See also, S. O. Osoba and A. Fajana, "Educational and Social Development during the Twentieth Century", in Obaro Ikime (ed) *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1980); A Fajana "The Evolution of Educational Policy in Nigeria, 1842 – 1939" (Ph.D Thesis, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 1969); Cf. A. Fajana, *Education in Nigeria, 1842-1939-An Historical Analysis* (Ikeja, Longman, 1978).

2. The Christian Missions in the South were more interested in education as an instrument of evangelisation, while the Colonial government on the other hand was interested in schools as agencies for producing various categories of minor administrative functionaries (like clerks, junior technicians in public works, sanitary inspectors etc.)
3. David B. Abernethy, *The Political Dilemma of Popular Education-An African Case*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), p. 125.
4. See Section 92 of the Nigeria (Constitution) Order in Council, 1951, cited in A. Fajana, *Education in Nigeria, 1842-1936, An Historical Analysis* (Ikeja: Longman, 1978), p. 235.
5. He was then the Western Region Minister for Local Government and at the same time acted as unofficial Leader of Government Business. See D. B. Abernethy, *The Political Dilemma of Popular Education.*, p. 16.
6. O. Awolowo, *Awo: The Autobiography of Chief Obafemi Awolowo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960) p. 263.
7. *Proposals for an Education Policy for the Western Region*, Laid on the Tables of the Western Regional Assembly, July 1952 (Ibadan: Government Printer, 1952) pp. 1-36.
8. Ibid., p. 464.
9. A. Babs Fafunwa, *History of Education in Nigeria*, (London George Allens & Unwin Ltd, 1974), p. 168.
10. United Nations: *Yearbook on Human Rights for 1948* (New York: Lake Success, 1950) pp. 466-468.
11. Ibid., p. 468.
12. C.K. Graham, *The History of Education in Ghana* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1976) p. 112
13. Western House of Assembly Debates, *op. cit.* p. 462
14. Abernethy, *The Political Dilemma*, 130.
15. S.O. Awokoya Nwagwu, *Proposals for an Education Policy*, p. 130.

16. Abernethy, *The Political Dilemma*, p. 141.
17. Action Group publicists estimated that the West contributed 40-50% of Central Government Revenue during the 1945-54 period but received only 27% of that revenue during 1948-51 and 36% during 1952-54. Figures taken from the Action Group review of the Chick Report *Daily Service*, January 13, 1954, cited in D. B. Abernethy, *Ibid*.
18. Arthur Hazelwood, *The Finances of Nigeria Federation* (London: Oxford University Institute of Colonial Studies). Reprinted Series No. 14 (from West Africa, August 27, 1955) p. 13.
19. David E. Carney, *Government and Economy in British West Africa; A Study of the Role of Public Agencies in the Economic Development of British West Africa* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1961), p. 109. See Abernethy, *The Political Dilemma*, pp. 141-142.
20. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. *The Economic Development of Nigeria*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1955) pp 169-70 cited in Abernethy, *Ibid*.
21. Abernethy, *The Political Dilemma*, p. 142.
22. See S.A. Ajayi, "The Development of Free Education in Western Nigeria, 1951-1966: An Historical Analysis". (M.A. Dissertation, History Department, University of Ibadan, 1984) p. 19.
23. *Western House of Assembly Debates*, p. 464.
24. N. A. Nwagwu, *The Politics of Education Policies in Nigeria*(Benin:University of Benin,2002),p.11.
25. *Proposals for an Education Policy*, p. 7.
26. *Western House of Assembly Debates*, p. 464.
27. *Western House of Assembly Debates*, pp. 465-466 Cf. a similar argument in Awokoya's *Proposals for an Education Policy*, p. 19.
28. *Proposals for an Education Policy*, *Ibid*.
29. Abernethy, *The Political Dilemma*, p. 120.

30. O.A. Akintoye, "The Need for Self-Government", *Daily Service*: July 13, 1950 cited in Abernethy, *Ibid.*, pp. 129-130.
31. *Proposals for an Education Policy*, p. 10.
32. O. Awolowo, *Awo: The Autobiography*, p. 268.
33. *Proposals for an Education Policy*, pp. 25-26.
34. B.O. Ukeje, "Forward Note" in N. A. Nwagwu, *The Politics of Education*, p. ix.
35. L. Cremin: *The Genius of American Education* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965) cited in Nwagwu, *Ibid.*
36. *Western House of Assembly Debates*, p. 462.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 464-465.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 465.
39. Otoni Amadi Nduka, *Western Education and Nigerian Cultural Background* (Ibadan: Oxford University Press, 194), p. 119.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Western House of Assembly Debates*, p. 464.
42. *Proposals for an Education Policy*, p. 18.